The Loneliest Season

By Abby Maslin – from her blog Reinventing Our Family, December 22, 2014

It's probably safe to say that the holidays aren't the most wonderful time of the year for every family. Sometimes it feels like the weighty emphasis on traditions, family, and joy can have the opposite effect, illuminating the missing pieces in our lives, the things we desire but do not possess, and our unfulfilled dreams.

As I think back to the first winter following my husband's injury, I have to admit I've never been lonelier than I was during those cold, long months. It's hard to explain to people, even people you love and trust, what despairing agony it is to sleep next to a person who has little to no awareness of your needs or feelings. This was my reality for nearly a year. For other caregivers, it can be a permanent reality. Yes, my husband TC was alive, but he was no longer my husband. And I was no longer a wife. I was a robotic hybrid of a mother, a chauffeur, and a therapist.

My gnawing loneliness was only amplified during the holidays that year. With a 2-year-old son in tow (one I was desperately trying to protect against the misery of our new circumstances), I was determined to make the holidays merry and bright. I powered through with an astonishing amount of energy, purchasing everyone's gifts, writing and addressing more than 800 Christmas cards, and even learning to cook a turkey (a true feat for a vegetarian like myself). I was on a mission, one that also involved hiding my real feelings behind a big, fake holiday grin.

The truth is I was so lonely I was worried I was going crazy. At night, I would close my eyes and silently speak to the husband who no longer existed. "TC, can you believe this?" I'd talk to him, believing that he was the only one who could possibly understand the insanity our lives had become. And yet, there was my husband, still alive, sleeping right next to me, seemingly unaware of my existence, and most certainly unaware that I was busy talking to his ghost.

At my most lonely moments, I tried hard to force some logic into my consciousness. He's doing the best that he can, I'd remind myself. Every bit of mental energy is going into his recovery. When he can be there for you again, he will. But these words were only of moderate comfort during the hardest hours.

TC was in his own prison of sorts. Unable to articulate himself through speech or to understand much of what was being said to him, his placid facial expression was his only means of feigning interaction with others. I'll never be able to fully appreciate the depth of his solitude during that time period. I can only empathize with the shared pain of feeling wholly isolated from the ones you love most.

This was a dark period, one in which I claim many admitted failures. So desperate was I to break through TC's wall of inattention that I occasionally picked fights in the sad hope of eliciting some reaction. This never proved to be a successful coping strategy, as lingering in moments of despair rarely conclude with any sense of satisfaction.

Within time, however, I began to learn an important lesson. To fight loneliness, you must be one hell of a friend to yourself. You must learn to practice self-forgiveness on a daily basis. You must also learn to identify each of your happy little pick-me-ups and then indulge in them at just the right times. The

diverting power of good books and bad television should never be underestimated. Neither should a good cry or a journal entry. The writing I did during this period was more powerful than anything since. And even though I'd happily trade that misery for a little less creative material, I'm glad I decided to put those complicated, heartbroken feelings into words because they will forever remind me that I, too, am a survivor.

Good friends have also been essential in learning to live with loneliness, but I buffer this claim with a caveat. As I've discovered, not every friend is built for the "real" conversations you will inevitably broach. Not everyone is willing or capable of going to that dark place with you, and some may even project judgment when you do. What seems to be true, however, is that you learn quickly which friends are willing to get their hands dirty and jump in the trenches with you. And those are the friends you need on speed dial for the moments in which the loneliness becomes supremely intolerable.

Lastly, there is one simple fact that is always of comfort: you are not alone. It is a horrible, cruel thing to lose a human connection with someone, particularly a spouse, child, or family member. Those of us in the brain injury world have been there, and we know that the sadness can be unspeakable at times. You are not selfish for craving companionship or for letting yourself feel the full weight of your sadness from time to time. Over the years I have found a lot of solace in reading the writing of other TBI caregivers. Honesty is healing, and other people's stories provide a powerful testament to the strength and resilience of both the brain and the spirit. Sometimes it seems that simply believing in happy endings can help us steer our lives in that direction.

As you prepare to face any personal challenges this season, I wish you abundant peace, patience, and self-love. It's lonely on both sides of this TBI coin, but never hesitate for a moment to lean on this network of supporters. You are always among friends here.