Navigating Life After a Traumatic Brain Injury: Embracing Reality and the Journey to Acceptance Presentation

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Today I want to begin talking about the process of acceptance. Through my process of acceptance, I came to a life changing awareness. I found that I could not begin to accept myself and move on with life until I first made peace with the losses.

The losses that I experienced because of my traumatic brain injury. In my quest to make peace with those losses I needed to address my sadness. In my experience I could not just “get over it” without first doing the necessary work to be able to accept those losses.

Identifying Losses

I needed help to be able to identify, accept and address my sadness and frustration so that I could move beyond my sadness and frustration. I needed to identify what I was experiencing so that I could move beyond what could not be changed. In my experience I needed to stop avoiding my reality. In Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s book On Death and Dying Elizabeth elaborates on the five stages in the grieving process.

The Journey Began

In her book she introduces the 5 stages that people go through as they grieve their loss (s). The first of these 5 stages is denial. Denial is a defense mechanism that protects the individual from having to confront the shock of their loss. Denial manifests itself in various ways. I have heard denial explained as a warm blanket that insulates and shields the individual from having to face their reality. Denial can be used.

**Denial can also be used as a door to shut out, that which is just too painful to address.**

Denial can also be used to ignore and avoid what we do not want to confront. Denial can be used to erect a dam to hold back unwanted memories and emotional pain. Denial can be used to suppress body memories. Denial can be used as a disconnect, so that our heart won’t let
our head know what is or what has happened. Denial can also be used to
defend, answer and explain away behaviors that undermine.

**Undermine our Time and Energy**

That undermine our time, energy and wellbeing. Denial can also be used to
dismiss or invalidate another person’s pain or reality. Invalidate another
person’s pain, in order to avoid having to interpret or address
uncomfortable feelings. Before I began my grief work, I saw denial as an
ally. When anguish motivated me to begin my grieving process, I began to
see denial as an active adversary. As my eyes slowly opened.

**Trapped in a System**

As my eyes slowly opened, I saw that denial was seeking to keep me
trapped in a system that would or could not allow me to realize or accept
my reality. In collusion with my fear (s), denial shamed me for not being
enough even though I sought to do my very best. Denial also sought to
keep me distracted so that I could not see a way to my destiny. Denial led
me to believe that I was my brain injury and disability.

**Minimized and Discounted**

My invisible disability, deficits and limitations. Denial minimized my passion
and discounted my gifts, talents and abilities. Denial, in practice, sought to
silence my voice. Denial kept me shrouded by a societal stigma that
devalued my worth because of my traumatic brain injury. Denial kept me
subservient to what other people thought of me. Denial undermined my
self-worth and self-esteem. Denial kept me distracted.

**Kept me Distracted**

Kept me crouched in the shadows of isolation. Denial told me that what I
thought and felt were of no accord. Denial sought to keep me distracted so
that I could not see the truth. Denial sought to disparage my value and
worth because I did not live up to denial’s expectations. But as my
awareness grew, I saw how my denial was limiting my life. In my anguish, I
made the decision to confront my denial.

**Several Valuable Lessons**

2
Through the process of confronting my denial I learned some valuable lessons. In my experience I discovered that as I confronted my denial, I needed to keep the focus on myself. I needed to keep the focus on my awareness. I needed to be accountable to and for how I was choosing to respond my loss (s). I needed to own my sadness and feel my feelings because of what I had lost because of my brain injury.

I needed to grieve my losses, instead of denying and detaching from my reality. I needed to stop trying to convince others of my awareness, especially those who want/need me to stay in denial.

What kept me Stuck

I needed to sit with my discomfort. I needed to determine why I was reacting to people, places and situations. I needed to determine why I thought that I needed to maintain my denial. I needed to love myself through the process of confronting my denial. Consequently, I could no longer blame anyone for my loss (s) or for how I was choosing to react to my loss (s), including myself. This was an ongoing process for me.

Accountable to Myself

Through my experience of confronting my denial I became more accountable to myself. As I continued and continue to be accountable to and for myself, I have been able to own my process. As I have been able to own my process, I have been empowered to move beyond my denial. In the process, I was able to break free of a denial system that sought to justify and defend its position by denying what could not be accepted.

By confronting my denial, I was able to open the door that denial sought to keep shut. I was able to move on with my journey through growing in awareness and acceptance. The acceptance of my loss (s) and myself.

In the process, I gave and have given myself the permission to be present for myself.

Strategies Denial Used

When I decided to confront denial, I became aware of how my life had been infected by a lie. As I examined the strategies that denial used to avoid the truth, I started having spiritual awakenings. One of these spiritual awakenings revealed that denial had been acting as a door.
A door, in that denial denied access to any and all unwanted thoughts or feelings. In effect, whenever any unwanted thoughts or feelings were triggered.

Whenever thoughts or feelings sought to be heard or experienced, denial would discount and minimize. Discount and minimize the relevance of those thoughts and feelings.

Denial imposed a code of avoidance to mask what needed to be addressed. Denial, through shame, actively sought to silence my voice and my acceptance of reality to limit me.

What I Discovered about Denial Systems

In a denial system that seeks to maintain that reality does not exist, feelings are considered a threat. Especially those feelings that trigger a sense of shame. Shame is different than guilt, in that shame is a being wound. Debilitating guilt and debilitating shame are very similar in that the individual is led to believe that they don’t just make mistakes. They; instead, are led to believe that they are a mistake.

Led to Believe

As an individual living with the impact of a traumatic brain injury and an invisible disability I was led to believe. Led to believe that because I did not live up to expectations, I was a mistake. Despite all of my efforts to prove that I was not a mistake, I still believed that I was a mistake. Because I was led to believe that I did not just make mistakes, for many years I internalized my inability to live up to expectations.

Justify my Worth and Value

Because I was led to believe that I did not just make mistakes, but that I was a mistake I remained in denial. As a result, for many years I sought to justify my worth and value through people pleasing, approval seeking and mind reading. I attempted to do more, to be more, to be enough. When these strategies failed, I sought to discard parts of myself that I found to be displeasing. Displeasing, resulting in my feeling defective.

Displeasing to my family, friends, teachers, schoolmates, employers and coworkers in an attempt to prove that I was not a mistake.
Slowly; but progressively, denial stole bits and pieces of me as an individual. In the process of discarding parts of my reality, I lost myself.

I had no idea of who I was, apart from getting. Getting approval from people, places and things, in order to not feel flawed and defective in being me.

Confronting Denial

As I mentioned, when I realized how denial was limiting my life, I made a decision to confront denial. When I began to confront denial, I experienced various reactions. Among these reactions was anger. I was angry at myself, angry at other people and angry at my reality. My anger many times came out sideways, because I had no idea why I was feeling. Feeling and because I had no how to express my anger in healthy ways.

I was angry at my deficits and limitations and life in general because I felt helpless in many ways.

In the process of confronting both my and other people’s denial, per my reality, I discovered that I had and held resentments toward various people, places, churches, educational institutions, and employers. Further confrontation of my denial revealed that I also had and held resentments towards myself. I also discovered that I had been undermining myself using huge amounts of time, spiritual and emotional energy.

Creative Capacity to Use my Passion

In ways that undermined my creative capacity. Undermined my creative capacity to use my passion (s) through my gifts, talents, and abilities. What’s more is that I had no idea what my passion was or how to use my passion. Use my passion through my gifts, talents and abilities.

Confronting my Denial and Anger

Per my experience, as I slowly became aware of my anger, I realized that I had bought into a denial system. A denial system that sought to keep me in denial through shame. Because I believed that I deserved to be shamed for not being enough, I internalized my anger. Debilitating guilt and debilitating shame then convinced and contained me in my denial because I believed that I was the problem.
I believed that I was the problems and thus deserved to be shamed and blamed for not being enough. In the process, shame undermined my ability to trust. Trust myself, my judgment and the process.

**Reactor instead of as an Actor in my Life**

Shame set the stage for me to become a reactor rather than an actor in my life. Debilitating guilt and debilitating shame left me feeling helpless. Debilitating guilt and debilitating shame sabotaged my ability to trust the process, a loving God and myself. Debilitating guilt and debilitating shame drained my spiritual and emotional energy. as I attempted to overcompensate for my unknown deficits and limitations.

**Through my process, I also discovered that much of my anger was buried under a mountain. Under a mountain called debilitating guilt and debilitating shame from which I needed healing.**

**Note:** As I understand, guilt is something one experiences when they do wrong. There is a way to resolve one’s guilt by making an amends. Shame, on the other hand, is a being wound that reinforces to the individual that they do not just make mistakes, but that they are a mistake. Debilitating guilt and shame convince that no amount of “punishment” or “amends” can take away one’s feeling of guilt or shame.

**Debilitating guilt and shame leave the individual feeling trapped, helpless, striving and isolated.**

**Turning Anger Inward**

When I started to experience my anger, in my helplessness, I turned that anger inward. For many years I unknowingly allowed my anger to fester in the realm of resentments. I had resentments toward various people, but the biggest resentment I had was toward myself. I was resentful towards myself because I was unable to prove to other people that I was not a mistake. To prove that I did enough and was enough.

But I rarely felt that I did enough or that I was enough. Consequently, I spent much of my life apologizing to other people for not being enough. Through my process, I found that much of the criticism that I had toward other people stemmed from self-criticism. Moreover, the judgment and
criticism that I showed toward other people were often in direct proportion to the judgment and criticism that I showed toward myself.

**Mirrored my Relationship with Myself**

Through my process, I found that my relationships with other people mirrored the relationship I had with myself. I also found that my resentments were; in a way, a cry for help, however, no one was listening. Instead, the direct opposite occurred. My judgmental attitude and criticisms of other people and myself alienated everyone and anyone who may have been willing to help. Consequently, I held onto my anger.

In my process, I discovered that as I held onto my anger and my resentment, I pushed people away from me. I also found that in the process of alienating other people, I was in effect alienating myself. Consequently, in the process I became my own enemy, because I held onto my anger and resentment.

**Shame and Guilt — Masters of Disguise**

*Note:* An excellent book to understand and find freedom from the impact of debilitating guilt and debilitating shame is *Shame and Guilt — Masters of Disguise* by Jane Middleton – Moz. This book has been instrumental in my recovery, healing process and ability to come out of denial. This book helped me to begin to love and accept myself as an individual before I realized the impact of my brain Injury.

**This book helped me to find the freedom to discover and accept my creative self.**

**An Awareness — Turning Anger Inward**

When I started to experience my anger, in my feeling helpless, I turned that anger inward. I turned my anger inwards because I thought that I was to blame. For many years I unknowingly allowed my anger to fester in the realm of resentments. I had resentments toward various people, but the biggest resentment I had was toward myself. I was resentful towards myself because I was unable to prove to other people.

Prove to other people and myself that I was not a mistake. Specifically, I spent huge amounts of energy chiding and berating myself for not being able to do enough, to be enough, to prove that I was enough.
Consequently, I spent much of my life apologizing to other people for not being enough.

Once I realized that I needed to address my shame, negativity, and critical nature I found myself back in a familiar anxiety. Upon further examination, I found that my anxiety stemmed from my fear of physical and emotional abandonment. In the process, I discovered that my fear of abandonment was firmly attached to my core belief — that I did not just make mistakes, but that I was a mistake.

**Struggling to Prove that I was Not a Mistake**

As I examined my motives, I determined that I sought to prove that I was not a mistake in order to avoid the dread of being physically and emotionally abandoned. This stemmed from if I did not meet expectations, I would experience anxiety, fear and dread. In the process, I discovered that my anxiety, fear and dread stemmed from a core belief. A core belief that I need to make other people OK with me.

**A Codependent Dance**

For many years I engaged in a dance with other people that involved these steps. If I detected that another person was not alright with me (feeling blamed and shamed by them) I believed it was my fault. Because I bought into the notion that if the individual was upset it was my fault, I set out to make “fix” them. Essentially to “fix” them so that I would no longer feel blame or shame. Blame and shame for being upset.

Fix the other person so that they would not go away. I did so because I believed if the person went away “abandoned me” that there was something wrong with me. My goal in these interactions was to make “you” O.K., so that I we could be O.K., in order to believe that I feel O.K. I did this “dance” in all my relationships to feel safe. Nevertheless, the dance created a “crazy making” experience in all my relationships.

**When I Became Sick and Tired of Doing the Dance**

When I realized that I needed to address my denial, anger, negativity, criticism and judgmental attitudes I began a program of rigorous honesty. I found that I needed to examine the resentments that I held toward other people and myself. In my process, I found that by examining my
resentments I was able to look at the patterns that I maintained in my relationships with other people and with myself. Through my process.

Through my process I discovered that the resentments that I held toward other people and myself actually sustained my denial. Sustained my anger, negativity, criticism and judgmental attitudes.

**Freedom from Self-Reproach**

Through being honest with myself I discovered that my anger and resentments held onto the keys that kept me trapped. Keys that kept me trapped behind the door that left me feeling isolated and alienated. I discovered that to take the keys to open the door, I needed to own my anger and resentments.

**Freedom from Isolation**

In my experience, I found that I needed to determine who I held resentments towards and why. Why I sought to maintain those resentments. Anger and resentments toward those individuals, family, places, churches, significant relationships, and institutions. I need to make peace with the anger and resentment that I held so that I could open the door. So that I could come out from behind the door.

**Come out from behind the door of isolation, alienation and feelings of self-reproach.**

**Free of Resentments**

In my desire to be free of my anger and resentments I needed to make a list of the people that I resented. Next, I needed to ask myself a series of questions regarding the people that I resented. I needed to determine what I believed those individuals did to me, how my life as a result was impacted. How my self-esteem, emotions, security, ambitions as well as my personal and sex relationships were impacted.

Next, I needed to explore how the situation, that led to my resentment, made me feel? I then needed to determine how I responded to the event. Next, I needed to examine what was my part that led to my resentment. How I contributed/participated in/to the situation that led to my resentment. Was I self-fish, dishonest, self-seeking, frightened, inconsiderate, etc.? Lastly, I needed to examine what I did right.
What I did right, if anything, in the situation that led to my resentment.

**A Strategy that Helped Me to Stop the Crazy Making**

In my experience, I needed to examine specific time periods in my life in order to be able to identify my resentments. Specifically, I needed to examine how I related to my family, friends, educational venues, churches, employers and other significant relationships. Because I wanted to be free of the negative energy that my resentments created, I did an inventory of my resentments during specific times.

**Specific periods of time in my life. I examined as far back as I could remember. About 6 years of age. I then examined time periods from ages 6-12, 12-18, 18-24, 24-30, 30-36, 36-42 and so on. I did so to examine patterns that led to my anger and resentment toward people, places and things.**

As I identified patterns in my behavior, I was able to address what was my part. What was not my part, and how I could be freed from the negative consequences of my resentments. As a byproduct, I was able to begin to recognize where other people ended and where I began. My expectations and their expectations. As a result of my inventory work, I was able to begin to begin and establish healthier relationships.

**Healthier relationships with both other people and with myself.**

**Stop participating in the Codependent Dance**

Through practicing rigorous honesty in my own ongoing recovery process, I was able to slowly stop participating. Stop participating in the codependent dance that led me to believe that I couldn’t be “OK”.

**As I Grieved what I was powerless to Change**

As I have grieved, I have grown in the awareness of my reality. In the process of becoming aware, I have grown in my ability to love and accept myself. I have been able to address, confront and understand the impact of my denial, anger and resentments. Being aware helps me to understand myself.

**The Impact of my Denial, Anger and Resentments**
I discovered that denial, anger and resentments produce a “spiritual and emotional plaque”. A spiritual and emotional plaque that attaches itself to the walls and channels of my creative capacity.

The effect of which blocks the flow of my spiritual and emotional energy. Clearing denial, anger and resentment gives me the ability to use emotional and spiritual energy to create hope in my life.

**Making Peace with Other People and Myself**

I found that as I made peace with other people and with myself spiritual and emotional energy became available. Spiritual and emotional energy that I once used to manage my denial, anger and resentments became available to empower my process. With this change I have been able to channel my spiritual and emotional energy in ways. In ways to use my passion to enhance my gifts, talents, and abilities.

Use my gifts, talents and abilities in ways that work for me. By addressing my denial, anger, and resentments I have been able to flush my previously blocked channels so that my spiritual and emotional energy can flow freely. As I have been able to examine the roots of my denial, anger and resentments, I have been able to make peace. Make peace with my past, so that my past no longer spoils my present.

**Addressing Distractions**

In my experience, I have found that by addressing the distractions of my denial, anger, and resentments I have been able to keep the focus on what is my business. I have learned to be responsible to rather than for other people and their choices. Consequently, I have been able to keep my side of the street clean in my relationships. I have been able to be aware of when I am participating in a dance of crazy making.

I have also discovered the power of choice. Consequently, I no longer need to believe that I am a victim of my circumstances. Instead, I am able to trust the process, a loving God and myself.

**Growing in the Power of Acceptance**

I have been able to learn valuable lessons. I have been able to take advantage of opportunities. I have been able to consider the possibilities. I have been empowered to be of service in healthy ways.