

We Must See Past What It Seems

by Melody Ross

□

□

□After a dear friend telling me about a hurtful experience she'd had this week. I began thinking again about a story I have told a few times....a story that my children will tell to their children, and maybe even beyond that... because it was such a learning experience in our family, maybe even a turning point. It's a story that I think about often because we were the main characters in it 3 or 4 years ago, and even though it was something that lasted less than 15 minutes it changed all of us and now I see others differently, especially when it seems that they might be main characters in the same story...or one a lot like it. I used to be too embarrassed to tell this story....but I am not anymore. This is a human story that everyone needs to hear, I truly believe this. I hope you will stay with it, it's kinda long.

□As we move along...I want you to think about some of the big signs with big messages that I bet you wish you could wear around your neck sometimes so that people would be more gentle, or even that you could put around the neck of someone you love -- so that you didn't have to go into a big long story to defend yourself or someone else-- so that people would just stop judging and and just be kind.

□

□I need to start this story by giving you a little bit of background. You see, my husband had an accident in 2004 that injured the frontal lobe of his brain. It has taken 6 years to get him back, but in the middle there, between 2004 and now, lots and lots of stuff happened. He was essentially out of it, but not just that, he changed to someone else, we lost him. His personality changed completely, he could not work, he was angry and depressed and could not cope with human beings. He did not feel love or affection, really he only felt anger, rage, and he was suicidal most of the time. He did not remember a lot of things. He could not take care of our family or even himself, really (and I want to mention again that through lots of miracles, he is 100% recovered now...we are so thankful....he is even BETTER than he was before his accident)

□But during that time he would have these confusing and amazing glitches of time when he would be totally normal. It was bittersweet. They would last for an hour sometimes, and sometimes for days or even weeks then he would sink back down into that horrible place. When he was sick, I protected him fiercely. I didn't want anyone to see him like that! I had faith that someday he would recover but man oh man it was lonely I wished every single day that I could just walk around with a sign like this...

□

□because on the outside I looked like I had EVERYTHING GOING FOR ME I looked like I might just have a perfect life but I was hiding a very painful secret...

□Well, a lot of other things happened too. You can imagine what might happen over the years while we have a 7 acre farm, a pretty big international business that we own with lots of employees, a life that HE managed before his accident, while he just let me do the fun and creative stuff. Now we had lots of medical bills, lots of sorrow and lots of distractions, we also had LOTS of kids -- and no one competent managing the business.

□Well, after a few years, I couldn't hold it all together. Our business was suffering for all of the reasons listed above and a few more reasons on top of that and we discovered that we were really SINKING. Well, one day when he was partly lucid...he was THERE...he was coherent -- I told him the condition of our life.

□He kind of panicked and he went straight to work figuring out what he could do. It was insanely heartbreaking when he would "wake up" after weeks or months and I had to tell him how much things were deteriorating financially, etc. It was very hard. But when he could, he did what he could before his mental illness sucked him back into the prison it kept him in most of the time.

□He called a sign place and had a huge sign brought out to our house...the kind that you can put letters on, and it was electric and lit up. He put it by the road in one of our horse fields. Then he drove our Suburban, both of our trucks, my classic Thunderbird that he got me for my birthday a few years earlier, our tractor, all of our tractor implements, the boat that I worked 10 years to get for him (and that caused his brain injury, incidentally), and he lined everything up along the fence and he put a price tag on every single thing. Then, he put the letters on that big huge sign and plugged it in.

□You have to understand that we had worked for MANY years for those things. We started a business in our twenties and we sacrificed everything we had for all of those years to make it work. We owned almost all of it outright, but, when I told him that the business was struggling, this is what he did.

□Sooooo...there it was. All in a row. All of our stuff --out in our field.

□All of the neighbors driving by, our friends, the community, people who knew us most of our lives and people who knew nothing about us...we were just the young family who lived in that beautiful little farm house on Beacon Light road with the perfect lawn....or what USED to be.

□You see, in addition, for months, our once beautifully manicured yard started to be filled with weeds that were now several feet high. I just couldn't keep it up. The lawn was a nightmare. Everything was just falling apart all around me and my heart was broken over my husband, too. It was humiliating and exhausting and horrible, really.

□

□Well, the sign was not up in the field for more than a few hours, when my husband's phone rang. It was someone who saw all the stuff and my husband's phone number on the big huge sign. We were sitting out in the yard while he was still coherent and he was

feeling devastated about the condition of our lawn. I was apologizing that I just couldn't do all of it. He was so heartbroken at his limitations and that he had left me to try to handle our life alone. We were trying to make a plan.

□He answered his phone. I saw that he was just listening. I could hear that the person's voice was getting louder and louder and louder. My husband just listened. He turned his back to me a little so I wouldn't hear. But I could hear it. It seemed to go on and on and on.

□These were the things I could hear on the other end of the phonecall:

□“You are bringing down the value of my property with that ugly sign!”

□“What are you doing?”

□“That is the most obnoxious sign, do you have a permit to have that out there?”

□“Are you starting a used car lot?”

□“You have got to get all of that moved and out of here or I am calling the authorities”

□I sat there, mortified, embarrassed, humiliated, mad, sad, devastated. I was certain that this would snap my husband back into his dark hellish place.

□But, when the man was done ranting, my husband waited a second and then very calmly said something that I will never, ever forget.

□“Sir,” he said, “There was a time in this country, in this community...when if you drove past your neighbor's house and saw every single thing they own was for sale in front of their house...and that their lawn had not been mowed for weeks....that you would stop and say....WHAT IS GOING ON, SOMETHING MUST BE TERRIBLY WRONG, WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP YOU?”

□The man was silent, and then my husband went on to tell him a few details about what was going on with our family.

□The man waited a moment and then his tone changed. He apologized. I mean, really apologized and then said:

□“I am going to call all of my friends and see if any of them need any of this stuff....”

□*****

□I wish with everything in me that we could have put a sign up on that big stupid lit up billboard in our field that said OUR LIFE IS FALLING APART, but all that we really could put up is a sign with the price of everything that we owned that was worth any money.

□WHAT IF we could all wear a sign that said what WE REALLY MEANT? What if we could go straight past the small talk or the masks, and we could actually go straight to the heart of the matter. What if our friends and family wore signs like this?

□

□...we would treat each other differently.

□I think we should just try to imagine it. That when a friend is quiet...or not showing up to stuff she usually shows up to, or acting a little “off”, or a family member is wearing pajamas to the grocery store for weeks on end, or not answering the phone, or the lawn is not mowed...

□

□whatever it is...

□IT IS A SIGN. It is not a sign that can be read in words and letters, but it is a sign that someone needs to be treated gently. That they need help. Most of all, that they need love, understanding, and that they DEFINITELY DO NOT need to be judged.

□Every time I think of this story I want to be better. I want to do better, I don't want any silent signs to go unread before my eyes or my heart. I don't want to make up my own answers to what must be going on. I don't want to assume...

□

□Let's be gentle with each other.

□Let's read each other's signs.