Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Adam Reborn: A Family Guide to Surviving Traumatic Brain Injury

Alex Stelmach
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★★★★☆
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Harmless horseplay led to a horrific injury for twenty-one-year-old Adam Stelmach. Adam fell four stories, landing headfirst on concrete. He broke bones in face and had other non-life-threatening injuries, but dreadfully, his life nearly ended because of a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Adam's brain was left bruised and bleeding inside his skull, and that would change his life and his family's life forever.

Alex Stelmach, Adam's father, is the author of this memoir. It is a difficult read because pain radiates from every page—Adam's physical pain and the psychological pain endured by Alex, his wife, Jill, and his daughter, Lisa.

By happenstance, Alex received a journal in the chaotic post-accident days. That journal allowed him to pour out his emotions during the hectic weeks and months that followed. That record gives this memoir coherence, immediacy, and impact. The journal also allowed the family to confront medical professionals with inconsistencies in proposed treatments and medications.

In fact, many of Stelmach's chapters give sound instruction: keep gas in vehicles, cell phones charged, don't forget "life goes on," there will be unavoidable routine chores like paying bills, and sometimes (as with TBI), too many visitors are bad medicine. The over-arching lesson of Alex Stelmach's book is this: "Remember, you are the caregiver. The advocate for your loved one's well-being. They cannot protect themselves."

Even simple things can aid in recovery. Soon after the accident, Jill created a collage of pictures —Adam in "real life"—and prominently displayed it in his room. The family wanted Adam to see something familiar as he awakened. More importantly, they wanted those treating

Adam to recognize that beneath the gauze, behind the eyes swollen purple, attached to the monitors and ventilator tube was a young man treasured by family and friends.

The author carries the story from his son's injury through the often trouble-filled hospitalization to Adam's steps toward recovery as he comes to "face the Trinity … commonly known as PT (physical therapy), OT (Occupational Therapy), and Speech … entities [that] can perform and inspire miracles in their own right."

Alex Stelmach makes no claim of being a professional writer. He offers a painful personal story to aid others in medical crisis, especially those coping with TBI. That makes it easy to forgive him for repeatedly addressing readers as "dear friends." Of slightly more concern is that the author proceeds well into the story before a time frame is established. The narrative is chronological, and so references to dates and periods (for example, the number of days in ICU) would have been helpful.

And, yes, the author admits that the question of *why* "nagged at me," but he does not wail and beat his head against some philosophical wall in self-pity. He gives his wife, daughter, and son much credit, but he himself is no less deserving.

Adam Reborn is a first-person chronicle of the human spirit, and a testament to a family's love and courage.

Gary Presley