



Recovering Memories

How one couple is learning to trust in God's faithfulness in the present after a devastating illness erased the past. **SHELLY CARLSON**

We have a timeline hanging on a wall in our home, and each time my husband, Calvin, regains a memory, we note it in the appropriate place. When he remembers a person or event, we write it down. When we drive by someplace that he remembers, we write it down. These are moments of joy for me. They serve as reminders of hope in the midst of an ongoing medical miracle that has strengthened my faith but that also has forced us into a painful, sometimes frightening, process of reconfiguring our life together.

Two years ago, Calvin's past was effectively erased when his brain was deprived of oxygen for eleven min-

utes, a length of time that kills most people or at least leaves them in a vegetative state.

On September 4, 2008, I was in my office next to the middle-school gym when the principal burst in to tell me my husband had collapsed on the bleachers. Seconds later, I found bystanders working to turn him over where he had fallen. Calvin had been cheering for the volleyball team that our future daughter-in-law was coaching. He was dressed in his familiar work clothes—leather boots, jeans, and work shirt—but his eyes were totally blank, and his color was darkening with each passing second.

I cried out for anyone who might know CPR. I was watching my

husband die in front of hundreds of people, and it was all happening so fast—and at the same time so slowly—right next to me and yet a thousand miles away.

Calvin and I had met through the Navigators ministry at Kansas State University twenty-six years before. After our first date, we both knew we had found “the one.” With Calvin, what you saw was always what you got. His faith was straightforward, summed up in the verse he quoted in our wedding

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ceremony: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9, NIV). He was known for his unassuming quiet kindness, and if you needed someone by your side, Calvin was there. People always joked that he knew someone every place we went.

My faith has always been more complicated. Calvin and I built a life together farming, ranching, and selling farm real estate. But earning our living through such unpredictable work was difficult for me. I worried about money. Sometimes I let stress overwhelm me. I became consumed with the activities and obligations that made up my life: homeschooling our children, relocating our family several times, working various side jobs, and volunteering in church and community.

One day Calvin inexplicably sat down with me to explain more details of our farm business. He showed me on maps which crops were planted on each field and how many cattle we had in the corrals and pastures. I became anxious, wondering whether he knew something about his health that I didn’t, but he reassured me that he had no premonition of anything happening to him; he just wanted to tell me.

Two weeks later he lay on a bleacher, his heart ventricle fibrillating—quivering and beating so rapidly that he couldn’t breathe or get oxygen to his brain. At the hospital, monitors showed only negligible brain activity.

When our pastor, Jeff Waugh, asked me how I wanted to pray, I didn’t know what to say. How could I answer that question? So many conflicting emotions and motives were running through my head. I replied, “Pray that God heals him 100 percent body, soul, mind, and spirit, or takes him home.”

God did something different.

Calvin lay in a coma for three days.

Then he stunned all of us when he opened his eyes and tried to sit up in his hospital bed. Before we could fully celebrate, however, the neurologist warned, “You’re in a desert. We don’t know how big it is or what pitfalls are there.”

Physically Calvin progressed quickly, and over the five weeks he was in the hospital, he regained much of his ability to function, from sitting up and feeding himself to even dribbling a basketball. Emotionally, though, Calvin was terrified. Coming out of the coma was like a movie scene in which a character awakens in a foreign hospital, not knowing who or where he is, surrounded by people he doesn’t know who are performing procedures he doesn’t understand.

Calvin would forget how old he was. He didn’t recognize himself in the mirror. He didn’t know his children or me. If we left the room and came back five minutes later, he didn’t remember who we were. He kept asking our pastors about the woman who was always around his room. He finally asked Pastor Jeff whether he should marry me because he wasn’t sure if he was ready!

Many people waken from comas with personality changes that leave them angry and even violent, but although Calvin was delicate emotionally and could be easily agitated at times, he also was upbeat and determined to get well. A great encouragement was seeing signs of Calvin’s steady faith peeking through. We would hear him singing a praise song in the hallway or find him praying in the middle of the night when he was confused.

But while he was making progress, I felt extremely vulnerable. How would we rebuild a life together without his memories? How could I care for him if he didn’t recognize me? *I’m a widow with a living husband*, I thought.

When Calvin finally was able to

come home, he still didn’t remember anything about our life together. For him it was like an adventurous honeymoon.

It was not that for me. I was overwhelmed. I posted Scripture passages around the house to encourage me. I relied on friends who stayed with us the first week and helped me set up safety precautions, such as installing a doorbell on our bedroom door to alert us if Calvin woke up during the night and tried to leave the room.

When I needed to cry and pray I retreated to the shower. Those first few months as Calvin regained his memory were like going backward through my father’s Alzheimer’s disease. Dad’s gradual loss of memories had been agonizing. His vibrant mind slowly declined into confusion as he forgot the events and people of his past, including our lives together. He had died just four months before Calvin’s collapse. Now I tried to help Calvin fast-forward as his mind attempted to piece together his childhood, our years of raising our children, our decades of marriage.

We went through picture albums, visited places of importance to us, and told lots of stories with friends and family. We worked together on the farm, hoping that the familiarity of ranching would help Calvin recover his memory and skills. The conversation we had had about the specifics of the farm operation helped serve as a guide as I ran our home businesses with help from friends and our son, Ben.

It has been a lonely, soul-searching time as I try to understand what God might be doing. When Calvin first woke up, the doctor cautioned me about being in a desert. While he was in the hospital, I was encouraged by the story of God’s constant presence with Moses and the Israelites as they traveled in the desert. Today I am strengthened by the story of Abraham

and Sarah making their way through the desert with no idea of their destination.

We have stumbled at times, to say the least. We grieve our losses, but we also rejoice in the gift we've been given of extra time to invest in our marriage, our family, and others.

Today Calvin works on the farm even though he still has gaps in his memory—chunks of working knowledge are lost. Relearning that infor-

and relearning the shared experiences of years together. He likes to surprise me with flowers from the field. He wants to understand how I feel and how I'm doing. The vows we took on our wedding day and the importance we place on our marriage continue to deepen.

We have reinvented some patterns to fit the new people that we have become. When we pray, for example, we ask, "How can we compensate for

tired mind, and an occasional dance around the kitchen lightens my heart.

Today, more than ever, Calvin and I live with the awareness that the future is unknown to us. Each day we attempt to accept our circumstances and live in the "now." I knew there would be changes as we got older—I had just hoped they would take place in a later season in life. But here we are, so we cling to stories of God's faithfulness.



Shelly and Calvin Carlson

mation can be very difficult. To compensate for his inability to remember things like appointments, he has to write everything down. He calls me a lot for help, and he doesn't hesitate to ask friends their names if he is struggling to remember. He also seeks advice for decisions he used to be able make on his own, such as whether he should wait to cut the alfalfa or do it now. We still add new things to the timeline in the hallway.

We are also rediscovering the familiar rhythms of our relationship

Calvin's challenge in sorting cattle?" rather than "How in the world are we going to do this?" We try to use our emotions of fear, anger, or insecurity as red flags to signal that we need time to re-center ourselves in God.

But I also need to be alone with God. Sometimes I lie face down on the floor, prostrate before God, offering myself to God but also needing to hear from him. Some days I am too overwhelmed to pray alone, so I call a friend and ask her to pray with me. On other days music revives my

I am learning to let go of my stress about not being able to control the future, and I am exploring how to remain in God's peace today, in this moment. God has not healed Calvin 100 percent, and I have struggled with what that means for us. Yet I recognize that God is working in and through us just as we are. We look forward to discovering how he can use our experiences for his glory, and we pray that as we adapt our lives to this new normal, he will direct us to a way to do just that. ■