

Season 5 | Episode #3

Life After Coma-Induced Memory Loss

Marcy Gregg

Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and I'm your host, Crystal Keating. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship and practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. As you listen, visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to access the resources we mention, or to send me your thoughts.

When 30-year-old Marcy Gregg woke up from a coma, 13 years of her memories had disappeared. In her mind, she was still 17 years old. She didn't remember her husband or her three children, including the baby she had just given birth to in the hospital. Everything had vanished. Faced with the daunting task of rebuilding her identity, even turning to alcohol to calm the pains of her weariness of capturing her memory, Marcy slowly put the pieces of her life back together.

As God brought her to her knees, her life began to change, and she finally returned to her true passion, art. Today in sharing her story, Marcy seeks to inspire others to find beauty in the abstract and hope in the unseen God.

Welcome to the podcast, Marcy.

Marcy Gregg:

Thank you so much for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Well, it's wonderful to speak to you and truly your story is so unique. Take us back to the beginning, Marcy. When you were 30 years old, you went into the hospital to deliver your third child and wound up in a coma. Oh, my goodness. I mean, when you woke up, your brain essentially reset to the age of 17 and you couldn't understand that you were married, that you had three children and lived in North Carolina. Tell us what happened.

Marcy Gregg:

Well, I went into the hospital to have our third baby, and I contracted pneumococcal bacterial spinal meningitis during the actual delivery. I had a sinus infection, and I actually blew bacteria from my sinuses into my brain during the delivery. Oh, and I went into a coma. I mean, it was very rare.



They had not seen it before. And they literally found me in my hospital room. It was 36 hours after she was born, and I was screaming with a headache. They called my husband and said to please come to the hospital. And by the time he got there, I was in a coma. The doctors did everything they could to try to help me.

They ran IVs. They even drilled the hole into my brain to relieve the pressure.

Crystal Keating:
Oh, my goodness.

Marcy Gregg:
And that did nothing. I just wasn't responding, and the doctors didn't give my husband much hope. But the people prayed, and God responded, and he moved. I miraculously woke up after a week of being in a coma, and when the doctors began to talk to me, I said, where am I?

I was very confused. I remember knowing that I thought I was in a hospital, but I couldn't understand why I was in a hospital. And they began to talk about me being married and having a baby, and I was like, whoa, you got the wrong patient. I'm 17, so I was terrified. I remember....

Crystal Keating:
You told them you were 17?

Marcy Gregg:
I told him I was 17. I believed I was 17. And then my husband came into the ICU room, and he bent down to kiss me, and I literally pushed back because he was this old man to me. He wasn't anybody that I knew, I thought he was a doctor. He was not the man I knew as a 17-year-old.

Crystal Keating:
So, so you had known him as a teenager?

Marcy Gregg:
Yes. I knew him when he was 19, and I was 17 when we were at SMU together. And I had fallen crazy head over heels in love with him in college. In fact, when I met him, I told everybody in college, and I remembered this, came back to the dorm, and said, I've met the guy I'm gonna marry. I was crazy about him. But he did not look like the man that I knew. He was now a 32-year-old man, not the 19-year-old guy that I knew.

So, I didn't recognize him, and when they started talking about me having children, I said, whoa, whoa, whoa. Y'all have the wrong person. I don't have children. So that was very, very hard for me to comprehend what they were saying to me.

And they ended up bringing in pictures of the children in photographs and putting 'em around my bed in ICU to try to help me remember them. But all it did was confuse me more. It was very confusing.



Crystal Keating:

Oh, absolutely. And did the doctors at that point know what had happened to you, why you had gone into a coma? And are they explaining that to you and is it registering? I mean, you just had a baby. Your body in itself had gone through a radical change. Could you even kind of identify with that?

Marcy Gregg:

No, I didn't know I had had a baby. I was literally, my hands were tied down.

I talk about it in the book. My hands were like strapped down in the ICU bed. I had tubes everywhere. I was very confused. I didn't know I had had a baby. I didn't feel like I had had a baby. My head hurt so bad. I think I was focusing more on that and on the pain of my head and my neck and my upper body hurting so badly.

So, I didn't really register that I had had a baby. What I was confused was more all these things they were telling me that I had had a baby, that I was married, that my memories would come back. And I'm thinking everything is fine with me. You all are the ones that are crazy.

Crystal Keating:

Oh yeah. Wow.

Marcy Gregg:

I mean, I'm fine. I don't know what's wrong with y'all, but I'm okay. So that was very hard for me. But God, in his mercy, and I really do believe it was just a merciful act of God, was that I knew Dev in college.

Crystal Keating:

And that's your husband.

Marcy Gregg:

And I knew him when I was 17. So, the longer he sat with me in ICU and the more he kept coming back in the room, I began to recognize something in him that was familiar.

What was inside of Dev kept coming back to me and he became familiar to me, so I began to trust him and what he was telling me. And then people said, well, what about your children? Did you remember your children?

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Marcy Gregg:

And this was the other thing that was just God through and through. It was just God's gift to me. When they brought the children to me after I had gotten out of ICU, I went to a private room and it was several days later, they brought the children in, and my parents brought the boys up to the hospital and they wheeled Callie in from the nursery.



And when they brought 'em into the room and when they put Callie in my arms and the boys jumped on the bed, I didn't remember them. But I knew they were mine. I knew. I can't explain that, except that it was God's gift to me. And that mother's instinct is so strong. There's a bond there that's so strong.

I knew they were mine. Yeah. And that love for them and the connection I felt to Dev is what was the catalyst. It was the catalyst that made me want to get out of the hospital. And it's what propelled me to say, I'm getting out of here no matter what it takes.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, yes. Good for you. That was like your driving force.

Marcy Gregg:

It was the driving force. And so, when the doctor said, your memories will come back, but we think you need to go to a rehab, I'm thinking, no rehab for me. I'm not doing that. I'm getting out of here. I'm going home. So, I began to fake it and pretend that I was remembering things when in fact I wasn't.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So, was this in the hospital when they're saying we want you to go to rehab, which would've separated you from your family again, right?

Marcy Gregg:

Correct.

Crystal Keating:

So, were they asking you questions to try to probe and see how much does she actually remember?

Marcy Gregg:

Yes. They sent people in but here's how I did it.

When people would come in to visit like friends of ours would come to the hospital that my husband would say their name. He would say, hi Jane, thanks for coming to visit. And I would just parrot what I heard him say. So, I would say, hi, Jane. And I would literally carry on, everything he said I would parrot. And although it was hard, they began to believe that I was remembering people as they came in. And that's how I got out of there.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. Wow. So, what was it like when you actually went home?

Marcy Gregg:

It was hard, the hiding, the inauthenticity. One, I felt so unsure of myself because remember, I didn't remember, and everybody thought I did.



Crystal Keating:
Right.

Marcy Gregg:

So, one example would be with the children. I had no history with them. I didn't know what they loved, what they didn't love. I didn't remember what their favorite foods were, their favorite books, their favorite toys. I couldn't remember, but I had to act like I did because everybody thought I was remembering things.

It was exhausting. I literally would go to bed at night exhausted, just pretending that I remembered my house, the things in my house, my family, the people that would drop food off. I had to pretend I remembered all these things. In fact, I didn't. So, I was very, very worn out.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and everyone from your doctors to your family thought you just needed time for the memories to return.

But no matter what you did, like you're describing, to try and recapture the memories, they didn't come back. So how did you keep such a big secret for so long? Like, were you looking at photo albums? Were you trying to like look through, a family history book or asking your parents? I mean, how did you do it?

Marcy Gregg:

Well see my mom and my dad thought my memories were coming back also. They were there. I had a lot of help. When I first got home, my husband, well, first of all, he was amazing, and he picked up a lot of slack. And then my mom stayed for a few extra weeks and in the book, I talk about a wonderful woman named Teeny, and she worked for us, and she babysat, and she helped me in many ways around the house.

And she would literally pick up the slack. She kept things running. And I really believe it hadn't been for her that people would've figured it out because she would take the boys places. She would pick the boys up. She was kind of the front for me. So, people didn't really see how messed up I really was.

I think that's a big part of it. My husband and I have talked about it many times and we think that was probably how people did not know. And people don't look for it. I looked perfectly normal, and people look at you and if you look normal, they think you are normal.

Crystal Keating:

That is such a good point, and we've heard that over and over again in our podcast conversations. For better or for worse, right? And so, even people dealing with sort of an invisible disability, which it sounds like that's what you were facing, they're gonna think you're fine. And I can just imagine as a friend, I would've been hopeful. Oh, she is coming back to us. She is remembering. She just needs our help. Not thinking like, oh, she's trying to just maintain and gut through this, so...



Marcy Gregg:
Correct. That's exactly what was going on.

Crystal Keating:
Yeah. I can see your friends just rooting for you in that way and being very forgiving about maybe the discrepancies.

Marcy Gregg:
That's exactly what I think happened. It, it's the fog for me now looking back, but I do believe that's how most people handle it. And I looked normal. I looked perfectly fine. Plus, I'm telling everybody I'm fine.

Crystal Keating:
Well, and you know, while you hid your struggles from your family and friends, nothing is hidden from God, and we know that. And yet you found yourself getting angry with the Lord too. So, what did you think was at the core of your struggle with God? And maybe you can talk a little bit about your spiritual life, even through those months where you're trying to remember and you're back home, and how are you processing all of that?

Marcy Gregg:
You know, I would get up every morning and I would sit at the kitchen table with my Bible, early in the morning, a cup of coffee, and I would pray. I had accepted Jesus as my personal savior when I was a young girl, and I knew God, and I knew he could do all things. He had miraculously healed my body in the hospital. I mean, it was a miracle. The doctors on the case all agreed that they did not do it. It was a miracle.

Crystal Keating:
Wow. Wow.

Marcy Gregg:
But the problem was my brain was the issue now. And I needed him to heal my brain like he had healed my body. So, I prayed every day, Lord, give me my memories back.

But he wasn't doing that. And when I began to realize that my memories weren't returning, and I talk about several events in the book when I just realized they aren't coming back. And it became really clear to me that they weren't. I found myself getting really angry at God that he basically was saying no to me. And I got angry. I really got angry at him.

Crystal Keating:
Right. Because, if you're believing that he has all the power and all the might and the goodwill, if he saved your life, how much more is he going to return your memory, you know? That would be in my mind.

Marcy Gregg:



Right. I, I just, I thought you can, but why won't you? And that was my question because I was so desperate and I felt like I needed my memories to be a mom, to be a wife. I needed my memories. I didn't understand why he was holding that back from me. And I felt like, I felt, that's how I saw it. He was withholding something from me.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. And that's gonna create a huge spiritual barrier between you and God.

Marcy Gregg:

And it did.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And so, you're, you're very open. You keep referring to your book. And so, let's tell our listeners that it's called *Blank Canvas* by Marcy Gregg, the amazing story of a woman who awoke from a coma to a life she couldn't remember.

You are very open that as the years wore on with no sign of your memory returning, you turned to alcohol. And-

Marcy Gregg:

I did.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Talk to us about the progression from starting out with a glass of wine and it just really developed into a secret addiction. How did you hide it and how did you find freedom from it?

Marcy Gregg:

Well, it was a single glass of wine started it. But it was funny when I had the one glass of wine, which was a drink that was a suggestion from someone that said, "Try a glass of wine. It will make the evening easier." That was the suggestion because I had made the comment, are your nights as hard as my nights seem to be?

And that was the one time I opened up a little bit to another woman. I didn't tell her I didn't have memory. I just said my nights seemed to be really hard. I was having trouble with the children's homework because I didn't remember how to do a lot of that stuff.

And so, I made that comment and her comment back to me was, have a glass of wine. It'll make it all easier. And I did that. And when I had that first glass of wine, I felt different. Literally after a few sips, I had a caution that went through my head, which I now know was the Holy Spirit, which said, be careful.

Be careful. And I knew I shouldn't keep drinking. I knew it. I knew I should put the glass down and walk away. But instead, I drank, and I drank because I was so frustrated and so upset. I drank to forget what I couldn't remember.



And I hid it by being very controlled in my drinking. People didn't know because I was very careful. They just didn't know. I didn't drink around the children. I hid it. I waited till people were in bed. I was very, very cautious. I didn't want anyone to know what I was doing because I was ashamed of what I was doing. Because I knew what I was doing was wrong. And I felt very guilty for it. But in the morning, I would get up and I would say, Lord, I'm sorry. I won't do it again. But I did it again. It was a vicious cycle that I was on.

Crystal Keating:

And your husband had no idea?

Marcy Gregg:

He had no idea. But the night I found freedom; I will never forget it because to me it was as big of a miracle as the night I woke up from the coma.

We were sitting watching TV as a family and I went to take our dog out to the bathroom, and I had had nothing to drink yet that night. And I was coming back up the driveway and our big greyhound, he saw a bunny in the hedges at the end of our driveway. And he lunged. And when he lunged, he, he pulled me down.

I literally went to my knees and as I was getting up, I had a perfect view into the room where I had been sitting and there was my husband holding my daughter. And the boys were all over the furniture still watching TV. And at that moment, I heard God's voice in my heart as I had longed to hear him in those years of silence while I had been drinking.

And this is what he said to me, and I will never forget it. He said this is what I saved you for the future, not the past. And as much as that father loves his children, I love you more. And just as that father has his daughter in his arms, I'm holding you and I will never let you fall. You just have to trust me.

And I dropped that dog's leash, and I went to the backyard, and I dropped to the grass. And I remember kneeling in the backyard, and I surrendered my life to God at that moment. And I said to him, I want your plan for me without my memories more than I want my plan with my memories. I knew that that was the only way for me, and I would trust him no matter what. And then no matter what's come, because they do, and they did come, more came in my life, but when the things came then, I trusted him. So, when I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, and it has literally affected my painting and affected me as a person, I trust him because he has this. He's got me and I know that. So, it's knowing that he has me, and I trust him.

Crystal Keating:

And that was a work of the Holy Spirit to bring you to that point of being able to surrender, knowing that he was gonna carry you.

Marcy Gregg:

Yes.



Crystal Keating:

And so, let's go back a little bit just to that conversation with your husband and your family. Did you confess right then and there to them? What was that like for you?

Marcy Gregg:

I didn't right then. I waited. I went to an alcohol support group the next day. And I began to really do the work to get sober and stay sober. And that was my last, it was December 10th, 1997. I had not had a drop of alcohol since then. That was it for me.

I gave it up. I literally knew that that could have no more place in my life. And I didn't say anything to anybody that night, except that I knew that things were changed in my heart.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. That's where it begins.

Marcy Gregg:

And it began there. Then after I went to the alcohol support group, I came back and I told my husband what I had done, and then we began to talk about it as a family.

And things began to really change. And I literally knew that life was gonna be different and it was because I was walking hand in hand with a father who was trustworthy.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That's so, so true. And if any of our listeners are finding that you're hearing it and it's resonating with you, just know that there is hope and there are people who can help.

And that this is not beyond God's grace. That you can find hope and healing. And so, you know, one of the things that we haven't really touched on in our conversation yet is how art is such a big part of your life. I mean, your book is called *Blank Canvas* for a specific reason. That you know, as you lost your memory, it's almost like you became a blank canvas for God to write his story upon and even talked about, you know, God carrying you through rheumatoid arthritis, which I can imagine would affect your ability to create like you used to. So, talk about how art has really shaped your life. I mean, you rediscovered your passion and talent for painting once you surrendered everything to God.

Marcy Gregg:

You know, it's given me a new perspective. If you came to my studio today, you would find paintings that aren't finished. There's several different paintings in several different stages. And all of my paintings start with scripture.

I take a scripture and I paint it on a blank canvas, and that's where I begin the work. And then I begin to paint, and I paint layer upon layer upon layer of painting. But if you saw a painting that wasn't finished, you would probably say to me, you know, that doesn't look quite right. It's not very good. And I would have to agree with you because it's not finished.



My paintings have so many layers before I declare that they are complete, and it takes every layer to make them what I want them to be. And one day when I was in the studio painting, I realized that God, he's the master artist. And our lives are his canvas. And every layer matters. Nothing is wasted.

He uses it all. And John 5:17 says that God is always at work, and we've talked about Romans 8 28. He works all things together for good, for those that love him and are called according to his purpose. He works all things together for good. He's always at work and I believe him, and I take him at his word.

And so, I know that everything I've walked through, every layer, God is using it to finish the work in me, to make me more like Christ. And so, he's given me a different perspective about what I've walked through and where I'm going and what I will walk through. So, he's changed my whole perspective and I think it's taken art to bring this whole thing that I've walked through. He's given me a visual to hold onto. Does that make sense?

Crystal Keating:

Oh, it makes complete sense. You have something in front of you that reflects life, that reflects all of our stories. You know, especially on this podcast we're talking with and about families who are affected by disability, unwanted diagnosis, unwanted changes in life where we can look at our future and think, this is not what I pictured or planned, and so do I surrender to my own hopes? Or do I surrender to God's? What is God's plan and intention for this? Does he mean good for me? And I can see as an artist, you have something in mind in the end. But each process and layer, as you said, matters, as you're developing it. And if you stop at any point, it doesn't look so good, but you know, it's part of the process.

Marcy Gregg:

Right. That's exactly right.

Crystal Keating:

That's beautiful. Well, Marcy, what encouragement do you have for someone who finds themselves in what feels like a totally impossible situation? I know your heart is to share the hope of Christ just as you did. If our listeners are here today saying, I feel like I'm in that blank canvas and there's layers and layers and I'm not sure where this is going. What encouragement do you share with them?

Marcy Gregg:

If you're in an impossible situation, I say to you today, I believe our God is at work. He isn't finished. Even when we don't see it, I am convinced, and I am confident that he will finish what he started in our lives. Philippians 1:6 tells us he will.

I mean, it says he's gonna finish what he started. And I believe that. I believe it because our God is the same God who sent his son to the cross out of love for you and for me. And that love finishes the work he began. God is gonna finish the work in us.



Crystal Keating:
Amen.

Marcy Gregg:
I just know it.

Crystal Keating:
Amen. What good words! Marcy Gregg is the author of *Blank Canvas*, the amazing story of a woman who awoke from a coma to a life she couldn't remember. And it is available on Amazon and all the common booksellers. Marcy, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today to share your story. We're so grateful that God is working in and through you.

Marcy Gregg:
Oh, thank you for having me.

Crystal Keating:
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