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Interview with Laura Bruno, author of *If I Only Had a Brain Injury: A TBI Survivor and Life Coach's Guide to Chronic Fatigue, Concussion, Lyme Disease, Migraine, or Other 'Medical Mystery*

After completing a Master's Degree in English at the University of Chicago, Laura Bruno spent two years in the corporate world. Just before her return to graduate school, she suffered a brain injury and could no longer read without debilitating migraine headaches. Years of misdiagnoses forced her to find alternative means of getting well. Now a writer and Intuitive Life Coach, Laura enjoys a full practice. From a woman once considered "permanently disabled," "If I Only Had a Brain Injury" is itself testament to the incredible resilience of human brain and spirit.

Tyler: Welcome, Laura. I'm excited to talk to you. You've had quite a journey that ultimately led to your writing this book. To begin, will you tell us how your brain injury occurred?

Laura: Thanks, Tyler. Yes, it's been quite a journey!

On May 19, 1998, I was stopped at a red light on a routine business trip in White Plains, NY. I heard brakes screech, followed by a huge crash. The last thing I remember thinking was, "Oh, man! SOMEONE really got it!"

At first, I recalled none of this. My memory of events only started to return about two weeks later. I just suddenly awoke in my stalled car to the sound of angry horns. I was so out of it that I actually thought my car had become my bed and the horns were the beeps of my alarm clock!

Apparently, I called my boss and asked what to do. I felt scared because I had no idea where I was, how I'd gotten into my car, or why I had "gone to bed wearing a suit." My boss' sons played hockey, and she told me later that she knew I must have had a concussion because all I kept answering to every question was, "I don't know. I just woke up." Finally, I looked in the rear view mirror and saw the woman behind me looking frantic. Either my boss or I deduced that the woman had hit my car from behind, and we drove to the side of the road to exchange insurance information. I had zero recollection of this conversation until she reminded me of it four years later at the trial.

Tyler: What happened the rest of that day? Did you go to the hospital or to work, and when were you aware you had a brain injury?

Laura: I remember having to wait a long time for the police to get there after the accident. When they finally did arrive, my neck hurt so badly that I just wanted to go home. I was so tired that all I could think about was my bed. The police officers really wanted me to go to the hospital, but I hated hospitals and couldn't wait to get to my home three hours away. I sensed the doctors would keep me overnight, and then I wouldn't get to sleep in my own bed. The police could not force me to go to the hospital, despite their concern, so they let me go.

The only thing I remember of the drive is sitting at a tollbooth in Newark, NJ and thinking, "If I were smart, I'd go to a hospital, but I want my bed." The next thing I knew, I was in my parents' driveway. I have no idea how I got there but must have driven on autopilot!

When I got to my parents' house, I felt really spacey. Because I hadn't cracked my skull and I had fainted from hypoglycemia in the past, they assumed I just needed to eat. We went out to a restaurant, and I couldn't read the menu. The letters were swimming, so I asked my dad to order fish. When it arrived, I felt too nauseous to eat, but we passed that off to the extreme pain in my neck.

My mom thought I needed a movie "to relax," so we went to Blockbuster. Everything started spinning, and all the noises and lights in Blockbuster made me feel like I needed to puke. I rushed outside. My head and neck hurt so badly that when my mom came out, I was just sitting by the car with my eyes closed. I have no recollection of what happened after that. The next thing I remember is waking up in my old bed at my parents' house, thinking I was fifteen again. My brain felt years younger because all the advanced thought processes I'd honed in college and grad school had evaporated!

I wandered around in a daze, and I am 90% sure that I went for a walk in the graveyard behind my parents' house. Everything seemed so dreamy and silent that I thought I might be dead because no one was home. I felt like a spirit, moving through the old set of my life. I didn't find my own gravestone in the graveyard, and I had an encounter with a live deer, both of which made me think that maybe I wasn't dead after all. It occurred to me that if I called my parents at work and they answered the phone, then I was still in their reality as a living person. They did answer, and they ordered me to go to the doctor because my neck still hurt.

I felt very self-conscious about my mind not working well, so I tended to fudge my way through conversations—asking people lots of questions about themselves as a diversion. For this reason, people did not always notice I had a brain injury. I managed to keep all my persuasive intonations and smiles and just pretended to joke a lot. If something sounded ridiculous, most people assumed I was joking. Only when someone really listened to my answers and ignored the smoke and mirrors did they notice I was consistently talking nonsense! I began to call myself the "magic eight ball," because my answers came as slowly and randomly as those from that little toy.

I tried to work, but I forgot where all my customers were located, and I would spend hours wandering around, trying to remember where I had meant to go. I began to work from home more often, but apparently, I kept calling customers and having the exact same conversations we had had earlier in the day. I realized I might have a problem when many of my regular customers would phone, hear my voice, and ask if they had interrupted a nap. (They hadn't.) I worked as a sales account manager from Pennsylvania for a company headquartered in Wisconsin, so I had little in-person interaction with people during those first two weeks.

At one point, I found myself at the library with no idea where I was or how I had arrived. Another time, I fell over in front of my parents and tried to pass it off as having tripped. They grew concerned about leaving me alone in my apartment and frequently drove me for overnight visits at their place. I could only keep up my non-injured charade for short-term encounters. When they saw me on a regular basis, it became obvious how impaired my brain function had become! I went on long-term disability and began a seemingly endless train of visits to doctors and other treatment providers, most of whom had no idea what to do with me.

Tyler: How would you describe your experience? Were you frightened by the knowledge of a brain injury, or did you grasp what had happened?

Laura: I had no idea how seriously I was injured, which, ironically, allowed me to remain optimistic about recovery. When my doctor diagnosed me with a "moderate concussion," I laughed and said, "Oh, that's all? I've had concussions before. No problem. Do you really think I'll need a whole week off work?" Hearing that I had lost consciousness at least twice before, my doctor sat me down and sternly told me that this was "much more serious" than I seemed to understand. He said it could take as long as 6-8 weeks to recover from this jolt to my brain and that I absolutely could NOT do any work that week. I smirked at his alarmism and laughed the whole way home thinking I'd have a free week to stay home and read books.

But when I tried to read one of those books, the letters swam all over the page. I found a way to squint and fixate on the book. If I ever looked away, the room spun out of control, so I just forced myself to read "The Sun Also Rises" without ever looking up. I had read that book so many times before that I did not notice I had no short-term recall of the plot. When I finished this so-called "reading" with no comprehension, the room would not stop spinning. I literally stumbled to my bedroom afraid I would black out and hit my head again.

I awoke the next morning and because of the pain and inability to see straight, I thought I was hemorrhaging. I called my dad, who lived an hour away, and told him I would leave my door unlocked in case I dropped into a coma before he got there. I really thought I was dying! It turned out to be the beginning of a migraine that lasted sixteen months without relief. Occasionally, large doses of migraine pills lessened the pain a bit, but it always remained. For almost a year and a half, and often thereafter, I felt like someone was driving swords through multiple points on my head.

I still tried to return to work and only deferred rather than cancelled my graduate studies, though. In my mind, I just needed some tweaking. Because no one could explain what was wrong with me, I always underestimated the severity. Because it was my own brain perceiving itself, I could not ever see the glaring holes in my cognition. Only when I started coaching and teaching other TBI survivors did I notice familiar patterns in their struggles. Knowing I had made an "impossible" recovery, I could finally afford to see how grim things had really been.

Tyler: How long did it take you to recover from your injury?

Laura: I remained completely disabled for almost four years. In Fall 2001, I began to work 5-7 hours per week as an assistant and Medical Intuitive consultant for my holistic vision/brain specialist in Seattle, WA. I could not work more than 10 hours per week, or my symptoms would incapacitate me again. In December 2002, I began assisting my now husband (Stephen) in teaching Reiki Certification Classes. He did about 80% of the work, but assisting him increased my confidence and challenged my brain to heal. To my frustration at the time, Stephen *never* treated me like a disabled person. In retrospect, I see that he was always strategizing and assessing how best to support my recovery. He never let me settle into anything less than my full potential.

I could not work a "normal" job for a company until December 2003—5 and ½ years post accident. I had still not recovered fully but took a waitress job, probably the most challenging occupation for someone with a brain injury. High pressure, need for short term memory, required good balance, working under florescent lights in the kitchen, learning a new computer system, carrying heavy trays up and down a steep flight of stairs, background music and loud, simultaneous conversations, keeping 4-8 tables worth of guests straight in my head, having to process in which order to serve the food: it was a TBI nightmare! But somehow, I managed to do it and in the end, all those challenges became a type of cognitive therapy. Six months later, I no longer had most of my cognitive problems, and certainly not to any disabling degree.

I usually consider myself to have fully recovered by November 2006; however, I still continue to improve. Whereas most people start to fade as they get older, I find that my cognition, energy levels and health improve every week. It's like my recovery included every aspect of my life, and now I feel healthier, sharper and more relaxed—consistently—than I ever felt pre-injury.

Tyler: What do you feel is the most significant thing you learned about yourself during this time?

Laura: I learned that I am not the external story of myself. At the time of my accident, I defined myself by rational intelligence, independence, ability to hit sales bonuses, perform well in graduate school, speed-read novels and philosophy, multi-task, find bargains on antiques, write, and lift weights at the gym. People who knew me well sometimes saw a mystical artist peak through, but I was generally out of touch with my Higher Self. The accident stripped away everything I thought I was, and I woke up one day realizing that even without any of those attributes, I still existed. It was eerie—like suddenly "getting" what Descartes meant by "I think, therefore I am." Some people glimpse that part of themselves during meditation, when all the trappings of life momentarily fall away through concentration. In my case, you might say that Life forced me into a heightened state of meditation from which I could not return. That underlying Awareness was all I had left!

Tyler: Laura, at first I was surprised by your comparison of yourself to Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz" but then, once I understood the comparison, I thought it a good one. Will you share that similarity with our readers?

Laura: Dorothy's journey *begins* with a concussion. Actually, it begins with her longing for something more than black and white existence. "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" recognizes something grander and more beautiful than ordinary life. Dorothy can feel her potential, but she initially feels too afraid to embrace that new life for herself. As soon as Dorothyabandons her resolve to leave, the winds begin. She arrives at the farm, too late to join the others in a tornado shelter.

Chance, Fate or Divine Intervention isolates the dreamer, leaving her vulnerable to a highly individual "accident."

When the twister rips a window frame from the wall and knocks her out, Dorothyreceives an answer to her prayer for change. As so often happens in life—particularly to people who sustain TBI—the answer is bigger and more demanding than she thought she wanted. But Dorothy recognizes the answer almost immediately in Munchkin Land, as she ponders, "We must be over the rainbow."

Recovery in Dorothy's case—i.e. awakening from her concussion—means returning to herself with a new perspective on the magic and compassion of everyday life. Recovery for me meant something similar.

Tyler: You also wrote your book because your husband was diagnosed with Lyme Disease. Will you tell us about his experience battling that situation?

Laura: It began with an odd rash near his armpit and a "flu" that left him without a voice for over a month. We lived in the Southwest, so even though my intuitive side kept screaming "Lyme Disease," we initially ruled that out as a possibility. The rash eventually went away, and he got his voice back, but he started talking in opposites. If he meant to say tomorrow, he would say yesterday. It was a little strange but seemed harmless enough when no one could explain the cause.

Gradually, Stephen developed visual problems, migraine headaches, joint pain, extreme fatigue, memory problems, meningitis-like rashes on the back of his neck, oversensitivity to light and sound, irritability, shaky hands, and cognitive deficits. Over the span of a year, he became an entirely different person, but his symptoms seemed so diverse that no one had any idea what to do for him. In October 2005, he grew extremely ill and rushed to the emergency room on three separate occasions for excruciating headaches, joint and heart pain. By now, I was convinced he had Lyme Disease, and I insisted his doctors give him antibiotics. They did and he felt better. It became a cycle in which he improved on antibiotics but would relapse as soon as the prescription ended. Since nothing initially showed up on any blood tests, doctors refused to prescribe anymore antibiotics. Fortunately, I knew of some herbs and essential oils that could fight infections, so I started him on these and continued to increase the dosage.

After visiting countless specialists in two different states, we finally found a doctor willing to prescribe the Bowen Lyme Disease test, which showed a rather high level of Lyme spirochetes in his blood. Based on this, the doctor prescribed long-term antibiotic therapy and told me to continue the natural treatments. It has been a long journey, but Stephen is definitely on the mend! He's still not 100%, but we're both happy that he can now run a photography business (www.stephenbrunophotography.com), get back to his writing, and enjoy exploring new areas. For someone with Lyme Disease, he gets around—hiking 5 miles or more, taking photographs of wild animals, redesigning his website. After seeing a loved one suffer so much, it's wonderful to watch his photography blossom and also to have my caring, supportive, funny, and amazingly creative best friend back!

Tyler: Laura, will you explain why you chose the title, "If I Only Had a Brain Injury"? It seems an odd title when you did have one.

Laura: Originally, I intended to call my book, "If I Only Had a Brain," as a reference to the scarecrow in the 'The Wizard of Oz." Someone else published a book by that title shortly before I released my book, and I also found that I could not reserve a domain name for "If I Only Had a Brain." On a whim, I thought of calling it "If I Only Had a Brain Injury," and I found that people loved the name. It immediately begs a question, and I like how someone can read into it in so many different ways. Additionally, the title both alludes to and departs from "The Wizard of Oz," which initially played a much larger role in the book. Over the years I added so much content that the book really took on a life of its own.

Tyler: Besides helping people better understand brain injuries, your book is relevant to people with other issues like chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia. What is the similarity between these health issues that makes them all addressable in one book?

Laura: In November 2003, "*Yoga Journal"* ran an article called, "Bouncing Back," by writer and meditation teacher Sally Kempton. She interviewed me (under my maiden name) and shared my story as an example of "resilience." To my surprise, Sally started forwarding emails to me from around the world. People with MS, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia shared how much they had resonated with my story. They described similar symptoms, experiences and realizations, and they wanted to know how I had gotten so well. At that point, I had already begun to write a recovery guide, but their interest encouraged me to expand the book beyond brain injuries.

Similarities include: loss of former sense of "self," debilitating fatigue, chronic pain, "fibro fog" (feeling like you can't access important parts of your brain), frequent sensory overload, mysterious symptoms that defy standard diagnoses, involvement of multiple body systems, and the inability to function even though "everything looks normal." These "medical mysteries" usually happen to highly intelligent, creative people with a latent spiritual side and good leadership skills. The survivors usually excelled in life prior to the onset of symptoms, and—to their doctors' frustrations—they do not feel motivated to regain an "ordinary" life. They don't want to work really hard just for basic functionality. Instead, they want something grander, more creative and influential, and they feel frustrated that no one seems to recognize the intensity of their struggle, their true potential, AND their desire to get well.

Tyler: What made you decide to write your book? What did you feel you had to say that maybe hadn't been said before about brain injury, Lyme Disease, chronic fatigue or other ailments you mentioned above?

Laura: Throughout my recovery, people kept telling me, "I can't wait to read the book," to which I would reply, "Yeah, I can't wait to be able to WRITE the book. Remember, I can't read anymore!" As soon as I lost my personal injury trial (they excluded my TBI medical records from evidence), I knew I would write a book. I did not know how, since I still couldn't write or read more than 10-20 minutes per day, but I knew I would. I realized I had a lot of gifts and a really blessed life and that somehow I would make it through this. For some reason, I've just always known that things would work out well for me, but I know other people get discouraged and have fewer resources. This had been an incredibly rough experience even for me—it had shaken my faith, though not ever destroyed it—and it made me angry and sad to think that millions of people with TBI's fall between the cracks. No one knows what to do with them, and if they don't have strong advocates and a belief in their own potential, these tremendously gifted people are expected to waste away quietly in the background.

As a Medical Intuitive, I get strong senses of emotional, spiritual, physical and mental patterns and how these all work together to create wellness or health imbalances. Intuitively, I knew that many of the books on brain injury and other medical mysteries had overlooked a key part of the healing process: the spiritual/life path component. Yes, some of them mention greater faith in God or a sense of synchronicities, but I could not find any recovery books that recognized the intrinsic connection between the neurological system and our spirituality. Recent studies on meditation suggest physical correspondences for spiritual experiences, but to my knowledge, until very recently no one was writing about brain injury AS a spiritual experience. I knew this intuitively and also through my own experience, but when I started encountering others with TBI, Lyme, CFS, MS and other so called mysterious conditions, it quickly became obvious that I was onto something. These are tomorrow's leaders—if only they can find their way back home.

After I dropped out of Northwestern's doctoral program in English Literature, some of the students and professors continued to invite me to social events. One such event involved a discussion of Salman Rushdie's interpretation of "The Wizard of Oz." The professor invited me, even though I could not read Rushdie's book. I surprised everyone (including myself) by taking a leadership role in the discussion—talking about how "The Wizard of Oz" walks us through a healing journey of the soul. I referenced Joseph Campbell's "Hero with a Thousand Faces," ancient mythology, and shamanic healing. The professor and this group of Ph.D. students listened spellbound until I grew too tired to talk anymore. That discussion in December 1999 actually marked the beginning of "If I Only Had a Brain Injury," although I did not seriously consider writing a book until after my trial, in mid-2002. By early 2003, my vision had healed enough to begin writing a few sentences per day. The book and my healing continued to evolve over five more years.

Tyler: Wow, that is an incredible story, Laura, and I am impressed by the idea that a brain injury can be a spiritual experience. It provides hope to people to see it that way. Besides telling your own personal and inspirational story, what other benefits or tools does "If I Only Had a Brain Injury" provide for readers?

Laura: I include 52 Healing Hints that address all the levels of healing—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. The book includes lots of physical tricks to circumvent symptoms. It also encourages people to embrace who they truly are and offer themselves to the world with gratitude. Many readers with no association to major health issues tell me how much they enjoy the book as a general health resource and a guide to the workings of their own brain. It's chock full of suggested reading, websites, support groups, and do-it-yourself-tips. Additionally, the book includes interviews and essays by 13 contributors in three categories: treatment providers writing to other treatment providers, caregivers, and inspirational stories from other survivors.

People consistently remark on how the book gives them insight into other people. I've had two readers tell me that the book really helped their marriage because the wives realized in reading it that their husbands had had a brain injury rather than a "personality transplant" or depression. While reading the book, they recognized symptoms in their spouses and remembered bumps to the head. The husbands were finally able to start proper treatment, which reignited their formerly loving relationship. TBI, Lyme Disease, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, MS, Fibromyalgia and Multiple Chemical Sensitivities are so prevalent that most people know someone affected by these injuries or illnesses. Reading "If I Only Had a Brain Injury" helps them understand and feel compassionate toward themselves and others who seem "difficult" but who may actually have medical issues as contributing factors.

Tyler: Laura, your husband took a long time getting diagnosed with Lyme Disease. What advice would you give to people who think they may have any of these medical issues so they get quick and effective treatment or diagnoses?

Laura: Do your own research or find an advocate who will make it a priority to research your symptoms. My book includes many and varied resources, and so does the Internet. Stay vigilant! Make your health your number one priority, and trust your intuition if you feel something's really wrong. Some of these illnesses are progressive, but if you catch them early, you can save yourself years of recovery. Even brain injury, which tends to improve over time, takes much longer to treat if the brain heals incorrectly. Because it took me over a year to find proper visual treatment, it took me 36 months of visual therapy to break down the coping mechanisms and rebuild correctly. One specialist told me that if I had had visual therapy within 4-6 weeks of the accident, I might have completely recovered in a year.

Tyler: Laura, you mentioned previously that you did writing before your brain injury? Do you have plans to write any more books?

Laura: Yes, definitely! I've written nine chapters of a Sedona-based novel series. I also have two other novels in various stages of completion. I absolutely love writing fiction! With the responses to "If I Only Had a Brain Injury" and requests from students, I can see I'll be writing additional non-fiction books, as well.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Laura. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they may find there about "If I Only Had a Brain Injury?"

Laura: I actually have two websites. www.internationalrenaissancecoaching.com is my Intuitive Life Coaching and Reiki Certification website. It includes many essays and articles on natural healing, consciousness and finding one's life path. www.ifonlyhadabraininjury.com is a website dedicated to my book, and it includes book reviews, an excerpt, reader testimonials, and links to buy the paperback or e-book version. (I offer an e-book because that format allows people to enlarge the print or have a computer read it to them, in case of visual problems).

Thank you for interviewing me. I’ve enjoyed your questions and the chance to expand awareness about TBI and these other “Medical Mysteries” that affect nearly 20 million Americans!

Tyler: Thank you, Laura. I hope your book does bring awareness and help to many people.

Listen to interview on Inside Scoop Live
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