

## **What Autism has Taught Me.**

**Jane Coburn**

I was raised as a very strict Catholic. As a child, I believed everything, I loved my church community, and I was always the most religious of all my siblings. There was one true path to God and I was on it! In college, when my worldview grew, I began to question some of the Catholic beliefs and embrace the fact that Jesus was all inclusive and that there are many paths to God. Despite these new views of my world, Catholicism continued to be the way I chose to express my faith. Old habits are hard to break.

When I was 22, I met Andy, a nice Jewish boy. While I was getting ready for my 3rd date with Andy, my mother came in my room and announced, "I refuse to have grandchildren who don't believe in Christ!" I thought she was crazy, but she was intuitive because I did end up marrying Andy. Andy was not raised religiously. To this day, he has no interest in participating in organized religion. He finds his peace in nature. When you don't see the boys and I at church it is usually because we are out hiking with Andy. He is the most amazing husband and father. Depending on the day, he is agnostic or atheist, but I know him to be a better Christian than most of us who call ourselves Christian. So, my mother got what she wanted. We had a full Catholic wedding and both my sons were baptized Catholic.

What she couldn't foresee was that it would be those very grandchildren that would lead me away from the Catholic faith. As my oldest, Austin, started religious education, I was starting to more deeply question the Catholic faith. I wanted to raise my children to embrace all people and to respect all religions. I wanted them to truly live as Christ did seeing the worth of all individuals regardless of their faith, their lifestyle, their gender, their skin color.

It was my desire to not pass on beliefs I questioned to my children that lead me away from the Catholic Church. We spent 3 years attending a Unitarian Universalist church in Chapel Hill. It was an amazing place where we learned so much about different paths to spirituality. Yet, I missed the focus on Jesus and wanted the boys to know him better.

Once again it was the boys that lead me to a different church: St David's where we have truly found the liberal Christian home I have craved. I have always been a spiritual person, always searching for the peace within. Part of this search includes writing in a journal. Michael asked me to speak at this service about two days after I had submitted an essay to Newsweek based on some of my journal entries. So, I decided it was meant to be that I share my essay with you. It is titled, "All I ever really need to know, I learned from my son who has autism".

Lying in bed and reading a book, enjoying some precious moments to myself, I am also listening to my husband coach my 10 year old, Austin, through taking a shower. He is learning to shower on his own. He has been learning this for months. My son is happy and mentions to my husband, "Daddy, I like that light you built in our room". Spontaneous comments like this one drift from Austin's mouth and wash over me like a warm ray of sunshine. Each word is a delicious gift for my ears to consume; a sign of his connection to us, to our world.

Savoring every syllable, I wonder how many mothers ignore millions of syllables that come out of their children's mouths.

This is what autism has done to me. It has taught me to pay close attention to my son's words, to savor them and to know they are precious. I realize that I get to be surprised every day by my son. What a gift! The next day, I continue to read my book. It is all about how this woman learns to quiet her mind and find the divine within. A spiritual search I have been on myself since adolescence. I am always moving, always talking, always wondering how to quiet myself. Then, I realize, Austin has been quietly sitting next to me for almost an hour just blowing bubbles and watching the clouds to see if it will rain. I know then that he already has this gift I seek. The gift of a quiet mind and I can learn this from him.

I start to wonder, "What else has Austin taught me." I realize that all I ever really need to know, my son with autism has taught me:

1. Patience beyond human belief
2. How to connect with another human being without sophisticated words or thought
3. That most people are caring and good and understanding and that some aren't
4. If you take the time to teach children about autism that they will embrace it and become the best advocates and allies for your child
5. Sibling love transcends all disability; this I learned from my other son, Jake
6. The previews in the movie theater are too loud and it is OK to cover my ears
7. Running water of any kind is absolutely beautiful and fascinating
8. Teachers aren't paid enough or given enough gratitude
9. Learning to tie your shoes isn't all that it is cracked up to be
10. IQ scores and labels do not define what a person can do on a daily basis
11. Insurance companies have no clue how to see the big picture
12. Giggling is contagious and so good for me
13. There's nothing like a bubble bath at the end of a long day
14. No one will advocate for my child the way I can and no one knows my child as well as my husband and I know him
15. Getting or giving a high five can feel so good
16. Music creates universal joy
17. We deserve a reward after a job well done
18. A peaceful walk in the woods can cure just about anything
19. Academically, I want my child "left behind" so he can learn at his own pace, and receive individualized education and have goals that make sense to him and allow his progress to be measured by his own work and not that of a percentage of his peers.
20. Get a good night's sleep, you are going to need it
21. Life is a marathon, slow down, take deep breaths, there's time to get it all in
22. Eye contact is overrated
23. A quiet person does not constitute an empty mind
24. The Wizard of OZ is magical even when watching it for the 300th time.
25. Be wary of dogs unless you really know them

26. Thunderstorms are beautiful and besides, we need the rain
27. The moon is a wonder
28. Getting a prize afterwards doesn't make getting your blood drawn any easier
29. Love and support can be felt through a telephone wire
30. It really does take a village for what would we have done without all the family members, and respite workers, and teachers, and tutors, and doctors, and therapists, and friends, and neighbors who have helped us teach Austin about our world

When you have a child with a disability, it is so easy to get caught up in the challenges and the needs and the "what ifs".

It's easy to always think about what that child needs to learn or what we need to teach him next.

I am always contemplating how to help Austin fit into our world and it is only recently (8 years after his diagnosis) that I have begun to want to know how our world can learn from him. It is a blessing to reflect on what my son has taught me. So, I take deep breaths, and I savor the quiet moments, and I watch the phases of the moon, and I wait with bated breath for his daily weather reports, and I watch his brother seamlessly move between the two worlds and I learn.