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Pas de Deux

Mark Osteen¹ 

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Abstract In this personal essay, Mark Osteen uses the metaphor of a *pas de deux* to dramatize how caring for his autistic son has enriched his scholarship and teaching. In his early years as the father of an autistic child, Osteen's parental and professional roles clashed, but gradually he learns to use what his son teaches him—particularly about nonverbal communication and multiple forms of intelligence—to develop a theory of empathetic scholarship and to enhance his pedagogy.

Keywords Autism · Caregiving · Intellectual disability · Music · Dancing · Fathers and sons

It's Easter weekend, and my son is dancing in the kitchen.

Twenty-three years old and severely autistic, Cameron is home for a weekend visit. The days grow long as he exhausts his minimal repertoire of interests: watching old children's videos or rock concerts on Palladia, taking lengthy car rides, enjoying a bath and long sessions of his unique string play. By evening he's aimless and bored, and his parents suffer from an oxymoronic condition—at once tense and enervated.

To shake things up, I put on a new CD—the rock group Train—and turn up the volume. On our kitchen's springy cork floor, my wife Leslie and I display our middle-aged moves: Les does some ancient high school cheerleader *pliés* and *jetés*; I haul out my old reliables—foot-dragging, hunched Joe Cocker gestures that I employed during my years as a rock front man. We encourage Cam to join in. At the first line of “50 Ways to Say Goodbye” (“My heart is paralyzed”), the spirit moves him, and he starts to sway, then spins wildly around our small kitchen, executing his own private *tours chaînés déboulés*. He thrusts his head, stork-like, from side to side and makes jerky motions with his slim, muscular arms, as his skinny legs gangle and bend. Cam's knees kick high, a wide grin creasing his face as he howls along with the song. I worry that he'll twirl himself dizzy or fall into the stove, but he doesn't. He's tripping the light fantastic!

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Cam's minimal speaking ability doesn't let him express himself well, so he talks with his body. I wish I had learned this language sooner.

My son comes by dancing naturally: as a toddler, he was in Leslie's arms almost every evening while she gamboled around the living room to Tina Turner's *Private Dancer*. Later reports from his teachers informed us that Cam was known for his terpsichorean prowess. So one recent Christmas we gave him a present that we hoped would draw out this talent. The game involved copying steps from a screen, the moves growing more difficult as the dancer advances. Unpacking the game, Les cheerfully reminded Cam how lucky he was. Then she attached the elastic sensors to his feet, squatted down, and helped him maneuver his size tens into the proper places. It was remarkably unsuccessful: he couldn't follow the movements.

"Come on, buddy, dance! You can do it! Dancing!" But Cam preferred to dance without attachments, a giant bird with a small grin curving one corner of his mouth, gazing at himself in our large living room mirror.

This experiment seemed a metaphor for our life with autism: a two-decade *pas de deux* comprising many crooked steps. There I am, a ballerino with a book on his head, trying to balance work and parenthood. There is Les, a bundle of energy dervishing herself into exhaustion. There was the eight-year limbo in which we bent ourselves like pretzels as we lived two lives: parents of an autistic teen for one-third of the year, empty nesters the rest. There was the dance of denial I sustained for several years before grudgingly accepting that my son was cognitively disabled. Paradoxically, that recognition freed me to see his intelligence and sensitivity. When I comprehended that Cam wasn't an unwelcome rival cutting in but a partner in our *pas de trois*, I was finally able to welcome him into my professional life.

Balancé

Being the father of an autistic child at first added nothing to my work. Far from it: the constant trips to the doctor, the frequent problems at Cam's school, the chronic anxiety and fear, the aggression and non-compliant behaviors—all these disrupted my focus and stole time and energy from teaching and writing. What's more, Cam's autism made my work seem trivial: how could I care about some obscure literary text or movie from the 1940s when my son was suffering? After we made the agonizing decision to place Cam, then twelve, in a residential school, we spent two years staggered by grief before wobbling shakily upright. Yet Cam's frequent and sometimes lengthy home visits tipped our hard-won balance awry. It was hard to adjust to the shift from uneasy duo to jittery trio.

Everything changes when Cam is in the house: our tidy kitchen becomes a chaotic landscape littered with crumbs, dried oatmeal, and torn packages of string cheese, its floor dotted with raisins, salt, and stray chips; the living room rug features a riotous display of gauzy string fibers—the debris of his signature "self-stimulatory behavior," pulling apart white shoelaces¹; the quiet rooms are pierced by loud claps, intermittent howls, and the boink of bouncing bed springs.

His visits caused a time warp: the days seemed to last forever, and Cam's interests changed so little in these years that any given day could be taking place in 2004 or 2007 or 2010. With Leslie at work, he and I would chill out for a while in the morning, then go for a ride or, when he was in a tranquil mood, visit a store or fast food place. In the early afternoon an aide might come to help out for a couple of hours.

The days combined stultifying monotony and constant vigilance: I couldn't work, and he was unable to engage in any activity, aside from watching old videos, for more than a few minutes; he didn't usually want to go outside or go swimming (a favorite activity when he was younger) and couldn't be trusted in public. A quick trip downstairs to check e-mail was inevitably followed by anxious questions: does he need to eat? Has he gone to the bathroom recently? Does he want a video or music? Shall we try to play hoops?

Essentially, we killed time. That doesn't sound too bad, but you'd be surprised how exhausting it is to do nothing for hours. Guilt complicated matters: "I should be working with him on educational drills!" We'd sing a song or two or shoot baskets in his bedroom, but he could sustain interest for only a few minutes.

One day after breakfast we take a ride to the nearby reservoir. I point out the Canada geese flocking near the water.

"Are those ducks, Cam? What's a duck say?"

"Quack."

"That's right! But these are geese. They say something else. What do geese say?"

He gazes silently out the window. I don't feel like performing, pop.

Those long rides create a different sort of time warp. We listen chiefly to '60s and '70s rock—the Beatles, Foreigner, John Mellencamp, Creedence—as I maneuver the car through traffic. Rocking out to the tunes, we become peers: I sing harmony while Cam adds obbligato improvisations—always wordless, always in key. Since we have no particular place to go, I stay under the speed limit.

I've often wondered what he thinks about on these drives. Does he welcome the sight of familiar stores? Notice changes? "Oh, too bad: that store went out of business. I wonder what will take its place?" Does he understand why some neighborhoods are full of garish signs and others contain only houses, or is the whole scene just a sequence of colors and sounds? One thing is certain—he feels safe. The automotive bubble holds the threatening world at bay; Cam can eat, drink and sing while an everchanging panorama flashes past. For a boy whose interactions with the real world are so fraught with anxiety, frustration and incomprehension, the car is a cocoon shielding him from sensory bludgeoning.

When we near home, I ask him, "Cam, do you want to go home, or ride some more?"

"Ride," he answers. Just in case he's merely echoing the last word (a frequent occurrence), I reverse the order.

"Do you want to ride or go home?"

"Ride." He stares at me, as if thinking, "Dad never seems to understand what I say the first time. I wonder if he's hard of hearing."

We surmise that Cam isn't capable of irony. But who knows?

At home, he throws himself on the living room sofa, grabs a pillow and begins to go at it.

"In the bedroom, buddy."

He glares at me. Spoilsport! Apparently, they've been talking to him about masturbation at school, for he looks vaguely embarrassed.

"I don't care if you do that, Cam, but it has to be in the bedroom. Come on."

Reluctantly he follows me to his room, piles blankets together and resumes. His method seems extraordinarily complicated. This would be the time to show him how to minimize his effort. Onanism 101: Rudimentary Techniques. I can't make myself do it.

A few minutes later he emerges. "Got a cigarette?" he asks. Just kidding. Actually, I look in soon afterward to find him relaxing on the bed.

During these long afternoons I recall my summer job during college, working as a clean-up person in a plywood plant. The job required only about four hours of work, but the shift was eight hours long. You couldn't just crawl under the machinery and sleep (I tried that); you had to look busy—walk from room to room, talk to people whose jobs occupied their hands but not their minds, daydream while pushing tiny piles of shavings around, empty and fill boxes. Above all, you did not watch the clock because then the day would seem endless, as the hands made their interminable crawl from 1:15 to 1:18. You told yourself a story or made plans for the evening. You sneaked a look at the clock: only 1:39!

At least I don't need to *look* busy when I'm with Cam; nevertheless, by 6 p.m., when Leslie is scheduled to come home from work, I'm anxious and testy. I used to wonder why he wouldn't do anything. But then I recalled my own lack of initiative during weekends home from college. I watched TV, read, hung out with friends, and ate a lot. Why should my son be any different?

A few days after each visit, I realize that suspending work to deal with Cam has cleared my head and helped me collect my thoughts. I work more efficiently after these enforced breaks, and often conjure up new plans or dive into current projects with renewed energy. Because I'm forced to alter my rhythms to stay in step with his, my perspective on work problems shifts: it's easier to differentiate the urgent from the merely annoying, divide hardships from inconveniences.

Once he returns to school, my life feels pointless, each day indistinguishable from the one before. I recognize again that a world in which you live only for yourself is a world without meaning. My son brings meaning with him.

Cutting in

For years my life was like one of those seventh grade dances where boys and girls form separate clusters: on one side of the floor was work; on the other, fatherhood. But sometimes Cam cut in, a bold boy inserting himself into the other clique. One October day, I was at work when I received a surprise phone call around 1 pm. Cam had just come home for a school vacation, and on that day we had arranged for a technician to fix the kitchen garbage bin. While Les and the visitor were busy, Cam had dashed outside and crawled into the man's pick-up truck.

My son had evaluated the situation. Let's see: a man is here in the afternoon. This is when my friend [i.e., aide] usually shows up to take me for a ride. I don't know this guy, but he must be here to drive me around. So let's go, bro!

But bro didn't go, and so for an hour and a half Cam sat in the cab, refusing to move, despite offers of string, Coke, and food. The visitor grew nervous: he had other appointments.

Les implied that I should cancel classes and come home. I resisted the suggestion. "I can't get him out of cars either," I reminded her. "Remember in August when he tried to climb into the neighbors' cars?" He'd dashed from car to car on our street, trying to open the (fortunately) locked doors until I'd diverted him into our own auto. I had classes to teach, and it was nearly mid-term. Couldn't she handle it herself?

Les was angry and frustrated. I knew the feeling: the kid won't comply with sensible requests, and to make matters worse, he repeatedly shouts "Car! Car! Keys! Let's go!" And now my spouse won't tear himself away to rescue me. Grrr.

I went off to teach, between classes placing calls home. No answer. I left a message recommending that they give him a ride in the man's truck, stop at the Burger King drive-through for a Coke and fries, then drive on home. I tried again at 4:30: still no answer. I was worried but figured that Les would call if an emergency was taking place.

When I arrived home at 7:20, Cam was in his usual spot in his room, surrounded by string fuzz. He looked crabby and so did my wife.

They had indeed driven Cam to Burger King in the man's truck. The man had quaffed a brew or two (I didn't mind sacrificing a couple of Yuenglings) while waiting in the yard: our son's antics had given him a good reason to indulge his own appetites. The visitor had taken the whole incident in stride. No doubt the beer helped. And he'd have an entertaining story to recount at the tavern that evening.

But he didn't know the end of the story. Upon arriving home, Cam had climbed onto our silver Camry, sprawled across the roof, and bounced on it repeatedly "like a gorilla" (Les's words). "He was up there for, oh, an hour or so!"

"Oh, my God." I said, peering out the window. "I don't see any dents."

"That's because I spent 10 minutes pushing them back out with my feet."

This wasn't the first time he'd turned a car top into a dance floor. Our other vehicle sported permanent Cam-created hollows.

After roughing up the auto, Mr. Energy had darted into the road in front of the house and sat there for another hour. Les, in a lawn chair, had watched over him until he finally went inside.

To our relief, Cam went to bed at 8:30. At 3:15 am he arose and entered the bathroom, turned on the fan and faucet, pounded on the floor, and asked for a bath.

Then he had a better idea. "Car! In the car!"

"Buddy, it's the middle of the night. We can't go for a ride now," his mom answered.

"Get the keys! Where are the keys?" Meaning: my mother is a fool. She can't even remember how to start a car.

"Keys!" he reminded her again. Then, "ready?"

From the bedroom I drowsily smiled. This was a veritable dissertation for our son.

He stayed awake the entire night. Les and I took turns napping on the couch while he watched TV. Was he excited to be home? Thrown out of whack by the change in routine? Asking to go back to school? Trying to tell us...something else?

Such interruptions breach the carefully tended barrier between work and home. My son insists upon being heard and seen, but his concrete language can be hard to translate.

Doing the limbo

Such interruptions were fairly rare. Most of the time during Cameron's teen years we lived a weird split life: two-thirds childless middle-aged couple, one-third parents of an autistic teenager. We never quite got in tune: were we a duo or a trio?

For nine years—from the time Cam was twelve until he graduated at age twenty-one—we lived in limbo, dwelling between two worlds, never fully occupying either. Each condition was

defined by what it was *not*. This limbo was also a dance in which we bent over backward to be in two places at once. The consequences were more emotional than physical. After gradually growing accustomed to life without Cam, we had to learn to live with him again. And when he went back to school, we experienced the original wrench all over again. Dropping him off at school, I'd feel immense relief, followed by an enormous surge of guilt for feeling relieved. These emotions were washed away by a wave of grief.

In fact, there are more than fifty ways to say goodbye.

Caught between youth and old age, between parenthood and the empty nest, we could neither move on nor turn back the clock. We danced forward while leaning back. We did the limbo!

One day in 2006 (Cam was seventeen), we cleaned out all his old toys. Mr. Potato Head, one ear missing, his tongue chewed partly off, went the way of all flesh; dozens of puzzles—each with pieces chewed or missing—got dumped. Into the trash went the little keyboards and the harmonicas Cam had briefly liked to play; to the Goodwill went the purple bicycle helmet he'd worn only three times; tossed out were the nerf basketball and plastic hoop.

This ritual seemed like a death. It was a farewell party for the little guy, the boy for whom we filled the toy chest, hoping against hope that he'd show interest in something, only to see him ignore the guitars, bongos, electronic gizmos, ball glove, paddles, finger games.

Near the bottom of the trunk was a miniature keyboard that plays songs with the touch of a button. For a few months when he was twelve, Cam had been obsessed with this toy. But he was really interested in only one song: "Skip to My Lou," which he would play over and over, sometimes for hours. I picked it up and pressed the button. "Skip to My Lou" jingled cheerily.

A large block formed in my throat. We'd lost our partner. What would we do?

As the years passed, I began to understand something I'd never grasped: how my students' parents feel when their children go off to college. I identified with their sense of loss, their recognition that they had to let go, coupled with a desperate desire to hang on. I felt the same yearning for my child and for my child's childhood. These parents, I realized, also dance the limbo. And the students, though excited about becoming adults, feel guilty for abandoning their families. Their homesickness isn't just nostalgia; it's also sympathy for their bereft parents.

The dance of denial

In 2008 I picked up my cheerful, grubby son from a week at summer camp.

"Did you have fun?"

"Yeff."

"Do you like Mr. Kevin?"

"Yeff."

"He's an interesting guy," Kevin had told me. "Very intelligent. And very strong-willed."

I laughed. "Yeah. He's got his own ideas. And he can be incredibly stubborn. There's no way to compete with him."

"Yes, I figured that out."

As we drove down the mountain, I considered Kevin's words. "Intelligent": even if he was just being polite, it was marvelous to hear that word used about Cam. I knew that he *is*

intelligent in his own way: for one thing, he's very adept at discerning what he can get away with—"he tested us all, especially the first couple of days," said Kevin—and avoids situations, such as a crowded dining hall, that will overwhelm him.

But the question of Cam's intelligence has always been difficult to answer. My first answer was no answer at all: for years I carried on a solo dance of denial, convinced that our Applied Behavioral Analysis program—two hours of educational drills after school and three hours per day on weekends—would enable him to catch up with his peers. After five years, when Cam was ten, I arrived at a crossroads. The program was going poorly, with Cam disrupting most sessions by pulling hair, pinching, or throwing tantrums. At our quarterly workshop, our director bluntly told us that we should suspend the program. We couldn't continue to subject the tutors—mostly college-age women—to our son's behaviors, and he wasn't learning much. The implication was clear: Cam wouldn't progress any further.

That evening, I came face to face with the meaning of "cognitive impairment." Our supervisor was saying that our son had hit the ceiling. He wouldn't learn to read and write, wouldn't develop past the kindergarten-level skills he already had. We needed to adjust our expectations.

I could not accept it. I knew that he had tested in the "moderate intellectual impairment" range, but I also knew that Cam possessed skills and aptitudes that were untestable or that we hadn't discovered. Moreover, to accept that he was "mentally retarded" would mean that the foundation of my world was built on sand. I had always valued a certain type of intelligence—verbal facility and a large, quick working memory—and (though I didn't admit it or perhaps even know it), I believed that people lacking these abilities were less worthy. I perceived intelligence as a single thing and had been rewarded for the same abilities that I valued.

Now I began to realize that my view of intelligence was nothing short of a prejudice. I had assumed that an inarticulate person couldn't be smart; an intellectually disabled person, in turn, must be a lesser person. I couldn't see his differences as anything but deficits. I'm not alone in this. As Margaret Price has pointed out, "the most important common topoi of academe," which include rationality, criticality, productivity, and coherence—"intersect problematically with mental disability." In fact, she proposes, "academic discourse operates not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability" (2011, 8). I had bought into this creed, and I probably held it even before I became an academic.

The catalysts for a change of mind was writing a memoir about our family's life with autism and reaching out to other academics with autistic loved ones. Gradually I groped toward a new outlook: an awareness that there are many different types of intelligence. Accepting that Cam is, by conventional definitions, mentally disabled paradoxically freed me to question that classification and to see him, and myself, in a new light.

Auto motives

Even so, I still sometimes need others to enlighten me. I've already mentioned how meaningful cars are to my son. One afternoon after he and his aide, a burly young man named Max, returned from an outing, Cam wouldn't get out of the car.

I went out to Max's car.

"Hey, bud," I said to my son. "Everything's good. Want to get out and get a string?" He exited right away.

Max explained, “The cars were different.”

“What’s that?”

“When we left, this car,” he pointed to our black Avalon, “was on the street, and the silver car was in the carport. Now the black car is here and the silver car is gone.”

“Wow! You’re right. Do you think he notices the difference?”

“He knows you drove off in the black car but that now the silver car is gone. He knows his mom’s not here.”

“Good grief! I think you’re right.”

As soon as Cam realized I was home, he came inside. Whether it was the mere fact that our cars had moved or whether his mom’s absence was the sticking point, I don’t know. Clearly, though, he knew who was driving which car, where they were parked, and what their presence and absence signified. He found meaning in our automotive minut.

That evening Les and I recalled an awful incident several years earlier when Cam had attacked her while she was driving him home from a pony-riding lesson. At the time we had no idea why he’d done it, but later we hypothesized that he’d been upset because she’d been driving “Dad’s” car—then a brown Corolla—not “Mom’s” car—the silver one. This latest incident seemed to corroborate that theory.

But which car is whose? When Les was at work, I drove the silver car, but otherwise I drove the black one. So Cam probably didn’t *habitually* associate one car with one of us (black = Dad; silver = mom) but rather noticed who was driving which car each day and memorized it. We’ve long known that Cam’s mind, like that of many autistic people, creates meaning through metonymy. For example, at his group home Cam recently acquired a new roommate named Chris, who frequently wets the bed. Before long our son was repeating, “Don’t pee the bed,” and “peedabed,” always while looking at Chris. In other words, according to Cam, Chris’s real name is “Pee the bed.”

Likewise, cars speak to him, registering altered family arrangements, marking time, representing identities. A few years ago a car resembling Max’s was parked in front of our house. For the entire day Cam went back and forth from the window, saying, “Coming! Someone coming!” Translation: Max’s car is here, so where is he?

I marvel at the myriad ways my son compensates for his disability, using autistic logic to make sense of otherwise incomprehensible behavior. If that isn’t intelligence, I don’t what you’d call it.

Body languages

One afternoon Max and I started talking about baseball—which teams needed what improvements next season, the steroid controversy, and so on. Cam interrupted.

“White is that?”

“What did you say, Cam? I didn’t hear you?”

He stared down at his knees. From the den, Les called. “‘What is that.’ He said, ‘What is that?’”

“That’s baseball, Cam.”

“It’s a game,” Les said.

“Buddy, you remember. You throw the ball, hit it and run. It’s fun.” Is that what he meant? I watch a lot of baseball on television; surely he knows what it is.

“He wants to talk about something else,” Les said.

Cam looked at me. “I sowwy.”

That phrase usually means “You should be sorry”—that is, “you hurt my feelings.” How had we hurt his feelings?

“I’m sorry, too. Are you sad?”

“Sowwy,” he repeated, then crawled to my side of the couch and put his head on my lap. I was astounded: he *never* does that. He lay there for the next several minutes as I played with his hair, then we traded smacking lips sounds and made silly faces.

What did this mean? Simple: Cam wanted to be included. He didn’t understand the baseball conversation, filled with statistics and jargon; he wanted attention, wanted us to talk about something he comprehended, even if it he couldn’t participate. Like any other person, he resented being ignored and talked around. No doubt he was also a little jealous that I was paying attention to Max—only a couple of years older than Cam—and not to him.

This may seem like a mundane occurrence, but to us it was a breakthrough: not only was our son speaking to make his wishes known, but those wishes involved a sophisticated social request.

This warm, fuzzy interlude was short-lived. After a few minutes Cam began to gnaw on my watch band; after I removed it, he gave me little pinches on the wrist, as if to say, “Why did you take your watch off? I was enjoying that!”

Nevertheless, the incident made my day, week and month.

Although Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences has not been embraced by the clinical community, it seems valid for my son, who shows well-developed musical, spatial-bodily-kinesthetic and, most remarkably, interpersonal intelligence.² Cam’s elaborate string play, for instance, displays an astonishing ability to focus. Test yourself by following these instructions: snatch a white athletic shoelace from the drawer and pluck out its individual strands one by one. Then wrap the fibers around your arm, fingers, your own or someone else’s foot, or a piece of furniture, until it twangs. Wave it around, then blow it into the air or into a corner. Repeat until you’ve created a substantial pile of fluffy filaments. It’s hours of fun! But could you do it? I couldn’t.

Cam’s string thing is like an ancient ritual or finger dance. This “stim” serves a variety of functions, one of which is to tell others he doesn’t feel like interacting (See Osteen 2010, 147–56). But if this behavior isolates him, that may be a consequence not of insensitivity but of over-sensitivity to others (this motive is cited by autistic authors such as Jasmine O’Neill and Donna Williams).

Cam’s aides also testify to his perceptiveness about people. He senses a person’s nature immediately, and if he doesn’t like someone, that person is probably a jerk. This acute emotional intelligence belies his autism, for those “on the spectrum” are supposed to be utterly singular and non-empathetic. But Cam is attuned—sometimes too attuned—to what others say with their bodies and immediately responds to any sign of intimidation, anxiety or repulsion. He tests those who betray these emotions by acting as if he doesn’t hear them or by doing what I call his Bartleby impersonation—indicating that he “prefers not to” obey a request by plopping down on his knees and refusing to move. This so-called “non-compliance” is usually directed at specific people or situations. His body speaks quite fluently.

This is the same boy who taught himself to swim (his stroke is a unique blend of dog paddle and crawl), and whose dance moves indicate a refined ear for music. A school newsletter article once testified to this talent. “July 4th was a special day here, complete with a cookout, games, and swimming,” it went. “Other activities have included a Hawaiian luau and dance, which were very much enjoyed, as well as a Talent Show. The winner was Cameron O., who wowed the crowd with his harmonica playing!”

Sure, he probably just blew it once or twice and then inhaled to produce the “whee-hee” that automatically completes a dominant to tonic musical cadence. I could picture him squaring his shoulders and exhaling proudly, acting a little startled at the applause and then, after being urged to do it again, repeating the phrase and putting down the “monica,” a slight smile playing over his lips, as if to say, “Well, I nailed that!” Five seconds of harmonica playing is his equivalent of a neurotypical teen’s lengthy piano recital.

As I’ve noted, when listening to familiar tunes, he’ll sing countermelodies of his own invention, obligatos that fit perfectly. And his voice is amazing: he fills our house with hoots and squeals, usually concluding with a falsetto eeeeeeeeee! that would make Frankie Valli turn green with envy.

Blinded by prejudice toward the verbal and abstract, I was for years unable to appreciate—or even apprehend—Cam’s intelligences. Recognizing them has enabled me to think and feel in different ways: to attend more closely to my own body, to others’ non-verbal communication, and to live in the moment.

Finding the groove

These lessons have certainly affected my behavior. I’ve always been an impatient person with little tolerance for those who move or think slowly. But it’s impossible to be more stubborn than an autistic teenager: you cannot win a battle of wills. I’ve learned that it’s sometimes better not to forge ahead but to drop back, to let someone else lead, or simply to wait—and that you often more successfully accomplish your goals that way. I’ve also learned that I sometimes need to take a backseat and let Cam drive (metaphorically, of course!).

Living with Cam has also altered my pedagogy. For one thing, I’ve learned to listen without judging and to respect differences in ability and styles. What students *don’t say*, I’ve discovered, often reveals as much what they *do* say. Because of Cam, I’ve become more aware of students’ non-verbal communication—what they convey with their positions at the desks, their locations in the classroom, their vocal tones, their body language during conferences. My non-verbal child has thus given me a new appreciation for students’ anxieties and enthusiasms.

I’ve also become more conscious of how the classroom operates as what Price calls a “kairotic space”: a domain where knowledge is produced and power exchanged, often through improvisation (2011, 60). My classes tend to be free-wheeling, and I’ve always loved the unplanned interactions that sometimes occur, perhaps because, as a jazz musician, I’m comfortable with *ad libbing*. But some students—shy kids or students with processing difficulties, say—don’t function well in such an environment. So I offer exercises that allow time to ponder and reflect before responding: brief in-class writing prompts, collaborative work with a partner, planned presentations involving scripts or performances.

Awareness of body language has prompted other pedagogical innovations. For example, I ask students reading *Great Expectations* to describe how Mr. Jaggers walks or how Abel Magwitch shakes hands. Then I ask that student or another to act out these movements in class,

or to find another character and model his or her body language. These exercises are not only fun but they also furnish an antidote to the sometimes intimidating sobriety and reserve of the conventional classroom. Further, they allow students to express themselves and interpret texts not only through written words but also through body language.

Cam's presence has even more powerfully altered my choice of texts. In my sophomore-level core literature course, for instance, I incorporate a disability unit that begins with Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy," and encompasses Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (narrated by a fifteen-year-old boy with an autism disorder), and David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (about a hyper-conscious thirteen year old with a bad stammer), among others. At the end of the unit, I ask students to write about their own disability and connect it to the ones dramatized in the texts. This section has become the most popular and provocative portion of the course: students—many of them science or business majors with little interest in literature—frequently single it out for praise in their course evaluations.

I recently taught a new course called "Neurodiversity," in which students encounter cognitive differences depicted in texts and films ranging from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon" to Temple Grandin's autobiography, Richard Powers's novel *The Echo Maker* (about a man with traumatic brain injury), and *Away from Her*, a lovely movie about a woman with Alzheimer's disease, adapted from a story by Alice Munro. The course title does not mean that I accept all of the neurodiversity movement's doctrines, which, ironically, seem to presume that all autistic people are alike. While I applaud their efforts to bring greater dignity and preserve agency for autistic people, I must say that when you see your child slap his head in frustration because he can't talk or cover his ears when a sound hurts, the claim that he is merely different and not disabled seems at once ludicrous and insulting. Nevertheless, I present neurodiversity as a potentially liberating way of understanding the human condition and of encouraging neurotypical people to respect and value those with cognitive differences.

None of this would have happened without Cam, who has shown me that the premises on which I had based my intellectual life and sense of self-worth were specious and benighted. Like a brilliant professor, he taught me what I hadn't even known I hadn't known. I now view the terms "disability" and "ability" as extremes on a continuum, not categorical conditions, as the consequences of a relationship between a person and his or her environment, not as stable descriptions of fact, and I try to convey these recognitions to my students. In short, my *pas de deux* with my son has helped me find a new teaching groove.

Partners

At the same time that I was learning to appreciate my son's unusual intelligence, I got acquainted with other academics who have autistic or intellectually disabled loved ones. The conference I organized in 2005 on autism and the humanities, which brought together neurotypical academics and adults on the spectrum, marked my first encounter with articulate, self-advocating autistic adults. As I assembled the essay collection drawn from the conference, I found my attitude shifting further. What should have seemed obvious finally made its way into my resistant brain: perhaps I could make our life with autism a *part* of my scholarship.

That work yielded the anchoring principle of my research on autism and the humanities: an approach I call "empathetic scholarship." "Empathy" doesn't mean pity: it recognizes that all

humans share needs, emotions and flaws, but it does not condescend or presume that “we’re all alike” in a pollyannaish sense. It also preserves what the philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls a “twofold attention,” which “both imagines what it is like to be” in another’s place *and* retains “the awareness that one is not” (2001, 328). My scholarship on autism issues from this empathy, which ideally may enable scholars to combine our professional training with the experiential knowledge we’ve gained as the loved ones of autistic people. Empathy certainly helped me to integrate my dual lives. My scholarship also fostered an emotional turn from the scalding rage and hatred I formerly felt—and the conviction that autism is an unmitigated curse—to a more moderate attitude: yes, autism is a disability, but it brings gifts and joys as well. Thus did my scholarship also affect my life as an autism parent.

As a conversation with and through another person, empathy is a *pas de deux* in which both parties respect each other’s moves and take turns leading. It preserves otherness while attempting to occupy, partly and respectfully, another’s mental and emotional spaces. Through such means, I have sought to make work and fatherhood steps in a single dance.

A few weeks ago Cam and I spent an evening in his room with the lights off. He laughed, and I laughed back. He bounced in reply. I tapped my feet to his video of “Me and My Shadow”; he nodded his head in time and vocalized in rhythm. He made smacking sounds; I made hooting sounds; he made hooting sounds; I made smacking sounds. I got up and shook my booty; he shook his head, as if to say, “no dancing tonight, dad.” No matter: we were already partners.

Endnotes

¹ Such repetitive and, to a neurotypical eye, aimless behaviors characterize many autistic persons. But they can serve useful and even therapeutic functions and do exert a calming or centering effect on our son; for him as for many people like him, they serve as coping mechanisms. For two autistic authors’ interpretation of “stims,” see O’Neill 1999 74–75, and Williams 1992, 212–16.

² Gardner first proposed his theory in his 1983 book *Frames of Mind*, where he isolated seven types of intelligence. Since then he has added two others: see Davis, et al. 2012 and Gardner 2011. The nine intelligences include linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential.

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