

Living with autism: A beach, a boy, a fleeting moment of joy

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A few weeks ago, my husband and I set out with our son to find the spectacular swimming beaches at Oregon's Rooster Rock State Park in the Columbia River Gorge. A few wrong turns and a very long and hot walk later, we stumbled across the most astounding beach I'd ever seen. In front of us stretched about a half-mile of warm water mini-pools and a large sandy beach with an island across a short sandbar. All of this was set against the stunning backdrop of the gorge on a cloudless summer day.

We set our blanket down and within seconds my son had stripped down and was splashing through the river, naked as a jaybird. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how you might look at it, this wasn't going to be a problem because apparently we had landed smack dab in the middle of a nude beach. To the left of us were several older men and women wearing nothing but sunscreen and floppy hats. And suddenly, there were naked people trekking across the beach to the island. As I stood there with a wry smile on my face, I marveled at the way we'd stumbled across another unexpected and unintended life moment, and how this so closely mirrored our experience with parenting.

Henry turned 6 this summer and he's autistic. He's not what most people would call "high-functioning." He is yet to understand the specifics of potty training, talking or riding a bike. He shows little if any interest in people. And he is constantly humming, singing or repeating phrases from videos he watches. This makes social outings an experience replete with stares and whispering.

Being the parent of a significantly autistic son is something I never wanted. It's a challenge I couldn't have anticipated or prepared for, and it's required that my husband and I completely change our ideas about parenting and life.

On the worst days, I wonder how we'll make it through the next few hours. On the best days, we celebrate the smallest of successes, like when Henry ate yogurt with a spoon, discovered he could open the refrigerator to get his own cup of milk, or when we hear him singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" as he swings in the garage.

The joy I feel as a parent seeing him on a roller-coaster for the first time, or splashing in this particular river, is something that we do get to experience, but those precious moments seem to come much too far apart.

I know there are other parents out there who feel like their experience with kids is not what they had hoped for. There are parents dealing with challenges each day that I could never imagine. I notice them first because they inspire me: a mom whose son was having a seizure in his adaptive wheelchair at Fred Meyer. When I asked if I could help, she replied, "Oh no, thanks, this happens all the time," and she lovingly kissed the boy's head while holding it steady. A mom who takes her developmentally disabled adult daughter each week to the Forest Grove pool so she can enjoy moments of freedom in the water. Parents struggling to help their daughter with an eating disorder. An acquaintance who is raising autistic twins with almost nonexistent family support.

Thanks to the Forest Grove School District, which excels at educating students with special needs, friends and family who help out in every way possible, a part-time job at the coffee shop that allows me some time to be silly, and a husband whose nonstop love, support and humor keep me sane, I've learned to appreciate the small moments of each day.

I think that for so many people in so many of life's situations, it's the few precious moments of joy that help us through the challenges. It's facing something terrifying, daunting and tough that does indeed make the great things seem even more so.

That's why I knew there was only one thing to do as I stood there on that beach watching my son splash with the biggest, most gleeful smile I've ever seen.

I tossed my swimsuit to my husband who stood there with a bemused -- but not surprised -- smile and I turned to join my son. Hand in hand, we ran off into the river, laughing all the way.