

Meet Some of Our Greatest Teachers . . .

One of the days of our summer youth program focused on understanding and receiving the gift of those who learn or interact with others differently or struggle with physical issues like blindness, hearing loss, and limited physical abilities.

This especially hit home for me as the mother of an adult son with Asperger's syndrome and two grandsons on the autism spectrum.

My son Jeremy was delightful as an infant, always smiling, good at climbing and imitating his older brother. It wasn't until he was about five that I began to notice that he was somehow different from the other kids. He was very uncomfortable when expected outcomes changed and he was quick to point that out to the others. He didn't seem able to read people's feelings or be able to take part in ordinary conversations. As a result, he had no friends and was frequently excluded and the object of teasing, much of it mean. He did well academically, but never quite fit in. Though I sought all kinds of therapies and assessments he never got the help he needed because he was doing well academically. It must have taken great courage for him to deal with the daily tormenting he faced. His high school counselor called him her "hero" for coming back day after day to the same mistreatment. I'm sure the other students weren't intentionally being mean--they didn't understand. In later years some of them contacted him and talked about being sorry.

Though he doesn't fit the usual mold he has been an amazing teacher to me. He taught me about innate goodness and compassion. His love for family is immeasurable. He has a wry sense of humor and a thirst for history and family roots. He was a loving caretaker for my mom and his dad until they died and he's now my house-mate. My life is much richer with him in my daily life.

My five year-old grandson Simon who has been diagnosed as autistic is another gift and teacher. He didn't speak until after three when he began to get applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy. I remember when he was first using a "talker" machine to help him communicate. It opened up new worlds for him. He finally had a way to share what was going on inside him. How frustrating it must have been for him before that. On one visit after identifying me as "Grandma Angela" he grinned and then hit the button for "Happy Thanksgiving." (It was Christmas.) There was a sense of humor hiding inside that we never recognized before. It wasn't long before he didn't need his talker to communicate. The way he sees the world is different from mine. He plays differently from other children and is uncomfortable and doesn't know how to interact with them. He's very sensitive to sounds and textures and movements. Often he is overwhelmed by all the sensory input and has a melt-down or has to "STIM" (self-stimulating behavior) by watching things spin or turn on and off to help regain control. Simon is loveable, smart, and facing mighty challenges—there's so much

inside he can't yet express, but he's persistent and so are his parents who are tireless advocates for him to get what he needs. They are my super heroes. Despite this Simon is already making a difference in the world with the people who work with and love him. I believe he has much to teach us about courage and experiencing life from a different perspective.

My grandson Sam has Asperger's like his uncle but he has had the interventions and support that were not available 30 some years ago so his life is less painful and he has less trouble fitting in. He's still perceived as quirky and has his own struggles but he's doing well academically and entering middle school in the fall. He plays the trombone, plans to join the robotics club at school, and is a Boy Scout. He loves family and hunts for airline sales for inexpensive trips to Cincinnati. His wish is that he and all his extended family "would live in one city." He's my first grandchild and has stretched my heart in ways I didn't know were possible. His life is still harder than most kids his age, but he's moving ahead.

I'm willing to bet that most of us can identify a teacher who made a strong impact on our lives. I'm also guessing that if we took time we could also name people that society would often overlook who taught us something that no formal teacher could.

Henri Nouwen, a renowned spiritual teacher and author said he learned the most from Adam, a profoundly handicapped man he cared for at La Arche community whose charism was to live with and receive the gifts of those whose perceived limitations often left them neglected or marginalized by society. Nouwen chronicled his experience in his powerful book "Adam."

Could it be that some of the world's greatest teachers come not from Harvard or Oxford but from those we often tend to discount or overlook? What amazing things could happen if we had eyes and hearts to see! What gifts await us!

"The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law."

~ Henry Nouwen

"Even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God's creation, made in his own image, destined to live forever, and deserving of the utmost reverence and respect." ~Pope Francis

