Lessons Learned – 10 Years Later
By Mary Jo Hebert

There is a five year age difference between my son Nick who is a high school honors student and his brother Louis who is disabled and in middle school. When Nick was seven and his brother was two, Nick asked me if Louis was as smart as he was when he was his age. It was the first time he raised a question about his brother’s differences. I chose my words carefully, avoiding any negative labels or harsh judgements. No, Louis could not do the same things that he had done at his age, I explained, but each of us has our own unique gifts to contribute and his brother would have gifts to contribute as well.

I tried to put up a good front, to appear as if I actually believed the words I was saying. In truth, at that time, I could not imagine what gifts this child who was so profoundly delayed would ever contribute. But Nick had an idea of his own. “I know what Louis’s special gift is, Mom,” he replied. “Louis’s gift is loving people.” And Nick was right. Louis does have a gift for loving people, but his greatest gift has been something else – teaching others how to love him.

How does a parent love a child who is nothing they had ever hoped for? A child who is slow in a world that values quick wit and a sharp intellect. A child who is clumsy in a world that makes heroes out of athletes and defines beauty as perfection. You begin by examining and letting go of your beliefs and ideas about what it means to be a good parent. You accept that the only true job of parenting is to raise a good human being, and you realize that if you signed up for any other reason - to raise a good scholar, or a good athlete, or a good anything - you signed up for the wrong job. You toss out all the old yardsticks by which parents are taught to value their children. And you begin to see all people in light of their strengths, not their shortcomings, and you learn to accept others on their own terms.

I learned that the Rolling Stones were right – you can’t always get what you want, but you just might find you get what you need. Turns out I got the perfect child, after all. His perfection lies in his ability to bring out the best in others. So in the end, the biggest surprise has been not that he is good at loving people, but that because of him we are good at loving people. If a more important lesson exists, I am unaware of it.

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