A SPECIAL LIFE, A SPECIAL LOVE

A PARENTS' JOURNEY TO JOY, ACCEPTANCE, AND UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Anatta Phoenix

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This book is based on the author's personal experiences and recollections. To protect privacy, the author changed some names, locations, and details. The author has written this work to the best of their memory and interpretation.

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LESS THAN PERFECT

Do you have a broken child? Is your world crashing down around you? I remember that feeling—the moment when everything you thought your life would be suddenly shatters into pieces. Your dreams of the perfect family now lie in tatters. That hopelessness and despair can feel overwhelming, can't it?

When you first realize your perfect child isn't what you expected, your life changes in an instant. And let's be honest—your first thought is that it's changed for the worse. The future you imagined vanishes, replaced by something uncertain and frightening.

But are you correct? Are all these gloomy, pessimistic beliefs really true? What if—and I know this might sound impossible right now—what if your life has actually changed for the better, and you just don't realize it yet? Does the mere suggestion of this possibility make you angry or uncomfortable? Many parents I've spoken with over the years admit that it did for them. I felt that way too.

I'm asking you to suspend your disbelief for just a little while. Let me show you what's possible when you open your heart to a different kind of perfect.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK

This book is primarily about my experience raising a young man on the moderate-to-severe end of the autism spectrum. The examples come from my own life and my years of watching other parents navigate the complex world of autism. But the truths I discuss can apply to any developmental condition that creates special needs.

While my examples come from autism, the need to accept your child's condition and find joy in who they are is universal. Whether your child has Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, Asperger's, ADHD, or any other condition that makes them "non-neurotypical," I believe you'll find value in these pages.

Autism is somewhat different from other conditions. Some children do grow out of certain behaviors. Some are misdiagnosed. Some are just late bloomers. The cause remains unknown, though most people have pet theories. Whenever someone tells me they know exactly what caused their child's autism, I listen patiently. I accept that they believe it. But I'm equally certain they're completely mistaken. Invariably, they succumb to the error of confusing correlation with causation.

The hard truth is that there are no proven effective treatments. Over the last 30 years, countless approaches have been attempted and studied in detail. None show any measurable and statistically significant improvement over no treatment at all. Some of the specific challenges I describe won't apply to every condition, but the fundamental truth remains: you can enjoy a lifetime of love, happiness, and thankful acceptance while caring for a special needs child.

This book is an extended personal conversation between me and you. I share many personal stories—some funny, some heartbreaking, all real. I avoid jargon whenever possible and explain concepts as simply as I can. Sometimes I use analogies that may not be technically perfect—after all, the map is not the terrain, and there's always more nuance in the details—but they help convey the essence of what I'm trying to share.

This isn't something you'll want to skim quickly for information. The content is emotionally challenging and takes time to absorb. I provide many mental disciplines I found useful in my journey to acceptance.

I'm not asking you to believe anything. You may wish to try these approaches yourself to experience the benefits I describe. Or you may not. I'm only sharing what worked in my own life. Take it or leave it.

YOUR CHILD IS NOT BROKEN

You might not be ready for this book. I don't offer treatment options here; there are too many, the information would quickly become outdated, and as I mentioned earlier, none has proven consistently effective. This book isn't a recitation of the emotional pains of being a special needs parent. I share my stories, and yes, some are painful. But this book isn't about sharing pain for pain's sake.

Overcoming hurdles and personal suffering demands more than empathy; it requires action. Though all special needs parents have unique experiences, we share a common thread that other parents have never known. And it isn't all pain and suffering. In fact, this book helps you stop seeing it as pain and suffering and learn to appreciate the special joys that come with the privilege of being a special needs parent.

This book isn't about transforming your child into a "typical" one. There is no autism alchemy, no blueprint for making your child something they're not. Your child is who they are. Resisting that fact just causes you and your child unnecessary anguish.

I'm not peddling hope for a cure. Maybe your child's condition will be treatable someday. Some children develop faster later in life to become more neurotypical. Many don't. Most children retain the traits you currently consider undesirable simply because they aren't neurotypical. The problem often lies more with our judgment concerning their condition than with the condition itself.

Whether or not your child's development quickens doesn't generally depend on what you do. Autism isn't caused by a lack of parental care. It can't be "cured" by parental care either. Good parenting can certainly improve your child's life, and the core advice of this book—to accept your child fully—is good parenting. But good parenting won't change their condition. Bad parenting, however, can create even more difficult problems because your child needs special help.

ACCEPTANCE OVER DENIAL

Most autism treatment books aren't helpful. For years, I read every book that promised a cure. There are no proven treatments. Many parents whose children improved credit this treatment or that one, but analysis shows that no treatment improves conditions better than no treatment at all. In short, the improvement and the treatment were coincidental. These stories often make parents feel like failures if their child isn't "cured." I find this message particularly destructive.

You may need to accept that your child's condition is incurable. And that doesn't make you a failure. There wasn't something crucial you missed. My wife felt guilt for years because we didn't find the "right" treatment. She believed she had personally failed our son. She was convinced more research, more treatments, or greater investment of time, money, and effort in "fixing" him would have made him neurotypical today. She recognizes this was wrong now, but she endured this emotional pain of "failing our son" for years.

I know several wealthy families who poured unlimited resources into treatments. No lack of trying. No lack of caring. The end result was not a cure. The biggest misconception is that it's a parent's failure. It becomes a hidden

guilt that never goes away, like the outdated and harmful concept of "refrigerator moms" that blamed mothers for their children's autism.

This book helps parents whose children will have lifelong disabilities. You may not think this book is for you. If you're searching for acceptance, you've found the right book. If you're searching for denial, you'll need to look elsewhere. Many books offer false hope for a cure, prolonging denial for months. Your sadness will be kept at bay until you try the treatment and verify its failure. At that point, you can try another snake oil treatment, or you could do the more difficult but ultimately rewarding work of learning to accept what is.

If you're ready to approach what is with an open mind and heart, this book may be exactly what you need. This book addresses the emotional challenges of raising a special needs child and finding joy and meaning in the experience. It's a guide to quickening your journey toward love, acceptance, and joy in your life as the caregiver for a special needs child.

WHO AM I?

I am Anatta Phoenix. Not my real name, of course. Anatta is a Buddhist term from the Pali language, meaning "non-self." The name acknowledges that I am not special or important. Phoenix is a literary allusion to a strong new creature that rises from the ashes of disaster. When you discover the joy you've denied yourself, you will feel reborn, like a phoenix.

Writing anonymously gives me freedom—freedom from concerns about self-aggrandizement. I'm not trying to impress you or anyone else. I'm not seeking accolades or virtue signaling. This isn't about me because you'll never know me. It gives me the freedom to write from my heart without fear and to speak the truth, even when it hurts.

I am the father of a young man with an autism diagnosis. He is a young adult now. I've watched him grow up, and I've grown up with him. He inspires me every day. He has made me the man I am today. I love him more than words can express. I owe him everything.

FINDING PURPOSE THROUGH PARENTING

The quest for acceptance is truly transformative. Learning to embrace reality acts as a crucible—it boils away irrelevant details, eliminates unnecessary tasks, simplifies life, and provides meaning. Through my journey with my son, I discovered something profound: the purpose of my life is to provide my special needs son with the fullest, happiest, healthiest life possible and minimize his suffering.

His life is beautiful, wondrous, and happy. I am living my dream and fulfilling my purpose. I am at peace. But I am capable of more. I had the idea for this book years before actually writing it. Spending time writing meant less time with my son, and for many years, I was unwilling to do that.

I decided to pursue bigger goals, taking a break from entertaining him. This still took longer, because I prioritized our time together over writing. The investment proved worthwhile; I want other parents of special-needs children to enjoy an equivalent—or superior—quality of life to my son's.

THE POWER OF COMPASSION

What is compassion? It's the fervent wish that all beings be happy and free from suffering. It's a feeling that arises in response to the suffering of others, rooted in empathy and our interconnectedness.

For some, this is just a fleeting thought or an interesting philosophical idea, nothing more. But if you allow your mind to dwell on the concept, a certain feeling arises. The more you focus on this feeling, the stronger it grows. Dwelling on it makes it spread and connect to other ideas and experiences. If you make it a practice to cultivate this feeling frequently, it transforms your life. You'll find that it arises at unexpected times, reforms your thinking, influences your decisions, and directs your behavior.

Compassion is a powerful emotion that becomes stronger with practice. Like any strong emotion, wisdom must temper it to determine the right action. Compassion motivated me to write this book. I want to alleviate the suffering of special needs children and their parents. I determined that I could best serve compassion by sharing my experiences and insights with you.

HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH THEIR PARENTS

My compassion for special needs children motivated me to produce this work. I extended my feelings for my own child to those I don't know. My compassion for my son is mixed with attachment; my compassion for other special needs children is pure.

I've meditated on the sufferings of special needs children many times. True stories of horrific things happening to special needs children are abundant. Many are completely helpless. They can't get their basic needs met. They rarely get anything they want. Some can't even communicate what they need or want. They are often rejected by family and loved ones. Some are abused and neglected. They live lonely lives shunned by others. They lack social skills but have no lack of social desires. They want friends, lovers, family. They just can't obtain them.

These are horrible truths to think about. But you must see and accept the truth for compassion to be activated. Most human atrocities were committed by those who dehumanized their victims, denied their sufferings, and rationalized away their compassion.

When you contemplate these truths, particularly for helpless children, compassion will arise strongly within you. Out of that compassion will emerge a strong desire to lessen the suffering of special needs children, which is why you are reading this now. Later, you will be motivated to do the emotional work I describe to improve your life and your child's life. At least, that's my wish for you both.

Compassion grew inside me until this book was bursting to get out. The song lyrics that begin each chapter open me up emotionally. I listened to these songs on a playlist, over and over, to put me in the right emotional state to express myself. Many of the words emerged through blurry tears of joy.

I want to improve the emotional well-being of special needs children. They are completely helpless. They often don't get the care and attention they need. **Ignorance isn't bliss—ignorance is pain.** Many special needs children endure suffering that is both awful and avoidable. But I can't reach them directly. They will not read my book, nor would they understand it. I can only reach them through their parents—through you.

Improving the emotional well-being of parents is a means to an end. I wish everyone to be free from pain and suffering. But parents can take care of themselves. I want parents to find benefit from this book. But more than that, I want parents to make their special needs children's lives wonderful, beautiful, happy, and full of joy and love.

By writing a book to reach parents, I hope to improve the lives of the helpless children in their care. And possibly, I may help you—the able parents—too.

UNDERSTANDING THEIR PAIN

Why do special needs children need emotional help? They have limited emotional understanding. They have limited ability to self-regulate. They are often rejected by their parents—which is a pain that runs so deep it's difficult to absorb. Let that truth sink in for a minute and feel how painful it must be.

Can you feel the suffering of your special needs child? You know your child, and you are close to them. You know their sufferings firsthand. Put yourself in their shoes and feel their pain and anguish. Don't recoil from it, but allow it to overcome you. Is your child stronger than you are? Can you bear to take the pain they endure daily? Allow yourself to feel it.

Ask yourself how your child must feel based on how you interact with them. Do you look at them and talk to them like they're broken or defective? How would that make you feel? Do you get angry with them when they don't understand or fail to comply with your instructions? Would you feel frustration in their shoes? Would you feel betrayed and alone?

Ask these difficult questions of yourself and be honest with your answers. You ~~may~~ will find it painful. But this pain is good for you. This pain is the root of positive regret. This pain will spur your self-improvement.

THE WEIGHT ON PARENTS

Why do parents need help? The divorce rate among parents of special needs children is high. If both parents reject their child, the stress tears the family apart. If one parent accepts and the other rejects, the stress tears the parents apart. If both parents accept their child, it brings them closer.

Parents must deal with the loss of their dreams—vicarious dreams of a successful, independent adult offspring. They face the loss of their own independence due to the ongoing need for future care. They worry about what will happen to their special needs child after they're gone.

Parents exert near-total control over their special needs children. These children have limited agency. They need the extra care and guidance. But most parents have no experience to prepare them for these challenges. Most people don't grow up with special needs in their household. Parents all want and expect a typical child.

Parents frequently lack direction. How do they meet their child's special needs? And just as importantly, have they solved their own emotional problems that wil impede providing the best care possible?

These questions aren't easy. The journey isn't simple. But I promise you, there is beauty, joy, and purpose waiting for you on the other side of acceptance. Let me show you how I found it, and perhaps you can find it too.

END OF INNOCENCE

MY COMMON JOURNEY

I've known my autistic son was special for two decades now. Through those years, I've also come to know many families with special needs children, and I've noticed so many commonalities in our experiences. It's like we're all walking different paths through the same forest, encountering the same landmarks, just at different times and in slightly different ways.

Wherever you are on your journey right now, you'll probably recognize these milestones I'm about to share. If you're just at the beginning, my hope is that this prepares you for what lies ahead. Maybe it will help you avoid some pitfalls I stumbled into along the way. I wish someone had given me a map when I started this journey.

VICARIOUS DREAMS

Children are natural fountains of hope. They bubble with possibilities, don't they? When my wife became pregnant with my son, I was absolutely ecstatic. We were in our early thirties, financially established, had been married for over a year, and the timing felt perfect for us to have a child.

I was overflowing with hope for our bright future—full of love and wonderful family experiences. Like all new parents, we didn't truly know what we were getting into, but we believed we were ready for anything. And we wanted all the things parents normally dream of: the joy of raising a child, being there for the ups and downs, eventually becoming grandparents, and nurturing that relationship for a lifetime.

In short, we wanted everything parents normally get when they have a family.

My child was supposed to be perfect. In my mind, he would have all my strengths without being burdened by any of my foibles or weaknesses. He was going to be naturally strong, athletic, and coordinated. He would be brilliant, naturally adept at learning all subjects. I imagined him as extroverted but introspective—the master of all social situations, exemplifying virtue.

He would never make any of the mistakes I did. He wasn't going to be merely typical—he would be extraordinary. In my mind, he was the manifestation of all that was good, a special gift to the world. He would have perfect motivations and barely require parental guidance. His stellar career would bring fame and notoriety, allowing me to feel enriched by my association with his greatness. My perfect child would help me become a better person through his flawless example of humanity.

But the truth is, not every child fulfills the dreams of their parents. In fact, no child does. Most typical children fail their parents in predictable ways, and most parents fail their children in ways that their children eventually overcome.

With special needs, though, these failures feel catastrophic. The dreams aren't merely adjusted—they're the first illusions to be completely shattered. And acceptance is the phoenix that must somehow rise from those ashes.

THE WARNING SIGNS

Looking back, there were signs that something wasn't quite right. By six months, my son showed few warm, joyful expressions and made limited eye contact. By nine months, there was little back-and-forth sharing of sounds

or facial expressions. At twelve months, he had little babbling, no gestures like pointing or waving, and rarely responded to his name.

By eighteen months, he had very few words, carried objects around for extended periods, displayed unusual hand movements, played with toys in unusual ways, and wouldn't look when we tried to direct his attention. By twenty-four months, he still had very few meaningful phrases.

But the thing is, most people don't immediately jump to the conclusion that their child has autism. The possibility feels too grim to entertain. Denial feels safer, more comfortable than thinking the worst. And it's true—not every child with signs of autism has autism (Please, don't grasp at faint hope because I said that.) Plus, autism affects every child differently. The deficits can appear random, with some developmental areas severely impacted and others not affected at all.

Being a new parent is incredibly stressful already. A baby is a huge responsibility, and there's so much to learn about their care. Worries about their development only add to that stress. So denial is natural—even appropriate—until the warning signs become too obvious and too numerous to ignore.

For us, no single warning was enough. It was the cumulative weight of many signs that finally painted the undeniable picture.

The realization didn't come out of nowhere. My son didn't turn over in the womb. As a baby, he wouldn't roll over on his stomach. He avoided eye contact and wouldn't respond to his name. He made few vocalizations. He would stand on his tiptoes and flap his hands. My wife always thought his scalp smelled unusual. He didn't play with toys appropriately, didn't point, and wouldn't look at what we pointed to. He didn't learn by copying others.

THE SICKENING REALIZATION

I remember the exact moment I realized my son had autism. My wife was visibly upset when she showed me a magazine article that listed signs of autism. As I read through it, I could easily recall specific examples of my son exhibiting each sign on the list. Before I even finished reading, I knew deep in my heart that my son had autism.

My denial—my willful ignorance of the truth—vanished instantly. Perhaps if the signs had been more ambiguous, or if I were more stubborn, I might have clung to denial longer. But I knew immediately, and I didn't doubt it or fight it. My memory fades at that point, except that I remember I began to cry.

I spent weeks in tears, sobbing deeply for the loss of my illusions. My world crashed around me. My first thoughts, of course, were about how everything impacted me. All my dreams for the future seemed destroyed. Rather than celebrating my son's achievements, I imagined I would spend my life making up for his deficiencies. I would be tied to a good school system, unable to move for career promotions. We wouldn't be able to travel and enjoy life. It felt like everything was going to be awful from that day forward.

Then my thoughts turned to my wife, and my troubles doubled. She would need to provide lifelong care for our son. Her burden would never end. She would endure unending stress and worry about him and his future.

But when my thoughts turned to my helpless son, the pain was so overwhelming I couldn't face it. My mind would go blank, and I would struggle to function. I lapsed into despair.

Our formal diagnosis came nine months after we already knew, and it turned out to be a non-event. We already knew what the doctor would tell us. We weren't in suspense or shopping for a different diagnosis like some people who go from doctor to doctor until one tells them what they want to hear.

The Doctor of Dispair

The most memorable part of the consultation was an unpleasant interaction with the doctor. As it turns out, doctors can be difficult too. After waiting nine months for an appointment with the best specialist we could find, the doctor chastised us, asking, "What were you waiting for?" to bring our son in for evaluation. She said his signs were so obvious that we should have come in sooner.

This hurt in two ways. First, we had tried to get in immediately, but her staff had put us on a long waiting list. We didn't bring him in sooner because we couldn't. But she implied we weren't good parents because we didn't seek her diagnosis earlier. Second, she used this heartless approach to break the news that our child was moderate to severe with little hope of a neurotypical life.

Before my wife could explain through her tears that we couldn't get an earlier appointment, I was so incensed that I was stunned into silence. I wanted to tell the doctor she was being terribly insensitive and should stick to research, but I wisely said nothing. The piercing look of hatred in my eyes probably expressed my feelings clearly enough.

The doctor undoubtedly thought our reaction was to our own guilt over waiting, but it was actually in response to her false accusation that we had failed to properly care for our son. Mixed with those emotions was the stinging realization that our child's condition was obvious and undeniable. We could see that too, but we didn't need to hear it put so bluntly from someone who was supposed to be compassionate and helpful.

It would have been easier to accept such a bleak prognosis if the doctor had conveyed it more sensitively. I had to focus my mind on feeling compassion for the doctor. My mind wanted to dwell on how insensitive she was, but I reminded myself that she probably thought she was saying the right things to get my son the best care. This doctor was likely accustomed to parents avoiding the diagnosis to sustain denial, but we weren't avoiding it—we simply couldn't get in any sooner.

Further, I tried to remember that anyone who says unkind things to vulnerable people probably isn't very happy themselves, so I should feel sadness and compassion for her situation. It took a lot of mental discipline not to keep replaying the hurtful interaction in my mind. My wife didn't manage this—she spent years afterward harboring resentment toward that doctor. It was not a pleasant experience for either of us.

The diagnosis itself didn't change much. The services we received didn't require a medical diagnosis. It provided a few additional treatment options, but little in the way of substantive help. We completed follow-up testing—brain scans and the like—but obtaining a formal diagnosis wasn't the game-changer.

Autism Radar

For anyone wondering whether their child is autistic, there's an easier way to find out that doesn't require a doctor's examination: seek out a parent with an autistic child. We've lived with autism, and we know the signs. A parent who has lived with autism develops an intuition born from years of experience and constant immersion. Most of us can spot another autistic child almost immediately.

We concluded my son had autism when he was 18 months old. Once we noticed, the signs became clearer, sharper, and even more obvious. What always stood out the most to me was how separate our worlds were. He refused all eye contact. Looking into someone's eyes is the most basic of interactions—it's acknowledging that someone exists. I spent hours trying different things to engage him, to get him to look at me, even for just a moment. But he literally would not look into my eyes for an instant.

And it wasn't just that he refused to look at me—he refused to acknowledge my existence altogether. Not in the teenage way of making a scene about ignoring someone, but by acting as if I wasn't even there. If I tried talking to him, he would ignore me or walk away. If I tried touching him, he would ignore my touch. If I offered him something, he might take it, but without any acknowledgment, as if some object had just appeared for his amusement with no cause. I was just another object in his world, and not a very interesting one at that. And this went on for over a year.

By the time he was three, he would interact with me occasionally, responding to me now and then. But he still had no speech. In fact, he didn't speak until he was six. We had experts tell us if he didn't speak by age five, he never would—they were wrong. He had no interest in speech except to obtain something he wanted, and grunting worked well enough for that. He had no interest in hugs or affection. My wife and I were useful servants, but little more to him at that stage.

THE SUFFERING OF SPECIAL NEEDS

Nobody wants to believe their child has special needs. Special needs persons often live a hard life full of suffering. Their cognitive disabilities put them at a significant disadvantage. They have limited abilities to communicate their needs and get them met. And what's worse, is that they face negative judgments for their incapacity, even from their own parents.

Ignorance isn't bliss—it's pain. Ignorance is not knowing what you need or how to get it. It's a life of not getting your needs or wants fulfilled. Special needs people have limited resources to help them. For better or worse, our capitalist system denies basic resources to people to motivate them to work, but special needs people often have limited skills and aren't that productive in conventional terms. Thus, they fall to the bottom and live in poverty.

Capitalism without compassion would simply allow special needs people to fall through the cracks. Even higher functioning individuals who can hold down jobs often make minimum wage with no benefits. Special needs people are more likely to fall victim to predatory lenders. Most live at or below the poverty line. Unless they have caring people devoted to them, they don't enjoy a high quality of life.

My son is blessed with a devoted and loving family. I hope your child enjoys the same advantage. But what about special needs orphans? A society can be judged by how it treats its most helpless members. For a highly developed country, our provision for special needs persons is lacking. Some states have reasonable social services, but even in the best states, they are underfunded and overwhelmed. Some private charities provide assistance, but this is like trying to extinguish a forest fire with a garden hose—better than nothing, but not by much.

THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL RULES

Complicated sets of rules are hard for them to follow. Special needs persons are often rule followers, but they don't have the depth of wisdom from what they've learned. Many don't have high emotional intelligence to

understand their own motivations. They often lack the empathy to understand the golden rule. They learn from the results of their behaviors, but those results depend on what was reinforced and what was punished.

Following simple, clear rules is how they function in a group. They're prone to inadvertently violate social norms because they simply don't grasp the subtle and unwritten rules of interpersonal relationships. Many don't read body language or understand facial expressions unless specifically taught. Some don't understand right and wrong intuitively, and they can unknowingly break laws out of ignorance.

My son doesn't have typical emotional reactions. In circumstances where most people feel sadness, like death or loss, he laughs. It's as if his brain is miswired to trigger laughter instead of tears. He can't contain his laughter at funerals. We had to work with him for months to get him to stop laughing at the sound of babies crying.

Thankfully, he isn't motivated to cause pain. If he were sadistic and thought pain and crying were genuinely sources of entertainment, we would have a more serious problem. But this doesn't appear to be the case. He's not motivated to make people cry just to laugh at their tears. I suspect when he feels sadness, he's experiencing the same emotions the rest of us do, but the outward expression is laughter rather than tears. But even if that's true, it doesn't make it any easier to explain at a funeral.

Elaborate or complicated philosophies are beyond many special needs individuals' comprehension. They can't be taught ethical systems with vague language, nuance, and contradictions requiring analysis and wisdom. Special needs persons aren't trying to live as stoic philosophers or experience "oneness" with others—they're learning and applying basic rules: Don't hit, pinch, squeeze, or bite people. Ask for what you need and want. If you don't get what you need and want, don't hit, pinch, squeeze, or bite your caregivers.

Beyond that, the rules may get more complicated depending on their capacity, but they must remain simple and basic to be understood and followed.

LEARNING VIRTUE THROUGH REPETITION

But special needs persons can learn basic virtues. With repeated attention and modeling, they can learn to emulate virtue. If virtues are modeled for them and reinforced, they can become wonderful people.

My son has learned generosity—he will offer his food and other enjoyments to others. I'm always pleasantly surprised when he offers me something I know he would rather keep for himself. He has also learned loving kindness—actions toward others motivated by warm feelings. He knows when he's being kind and acting out of love for his family, and he gets very excited about it. He asks for praise about being a good boy, and we heap praise on him to nurture this seed.

I've explained to my son many times that the most important thing he can learn to enjoy his life is to be kind to his caregivers. It's like "don't bite the hand that feeds you." Realistically, caregivers will do whatever their duty requires or whatever they're paid to do. However, if they receive kindness in return, they're more motivated to ensure proper care and go above and beyond for their charge.

Compassion is much more difficult for many special needs persons because they often lack the basic understanding of self and other—the foundation for all empathy. The sense of self that Buddhists strive to overcome is actually needed to feel empathy. If you don't have a sense of self, you can't appreciate that others also

have their own experiences. My son has developed compassion for his immediate family, but it's still rudimentary. I know it's there because he takes satisfaction in giving, expressing love, and being kind.

Special needs persons can live an exceptional life if they obtain the help they need. Like everyone else, they are products of their environment. They are often not burdened by the needs and wants that plague the rest of us. Special needs persons are worthy of love and acceptance, and they will return that love once you learn to enter their world. If they are in an environment that supports them and teaches them virtue, that's what they enjoy internally, and that's what gets expressed when they're out in the world.

My Son's Nana Was His Savior

My wife's mother was very close to my son. She lived on another continent, so when she came to visit, she would stay for months at a time. Her visits were always welcomed—she didn't interfere with our parenting or cause strife in our household. And she was enthusiastically and energetically devoted to our son.

If not for his Nana's frequent long visits, I wonder if my son would have ever desired human contact at all. During that period when he would ignore me and my wife, he would interact with his Nana. I occasionally felt jealousy arise, but it was immediately replaced by gratitude for the good I saw coming from his budding relationship with her.

She would sing to him, read him books, and interact with him all day, every day, whether he seemed to want to or not. She was never dissuaded by him ignoring her, never put off by his lack of social skills, never angry at him or critical of what he did. She was always loving, accepting, and devoted to his care. If I make her sound like a saint, it's because she was, at least to my son.

She was the first person he ever felt drawn to, the first person he wanted to interact with. She made him laugh—something my wife and I could never do. She helped him find a sense of humor and a playfulness he still has today. Whenever I see my son laugh, or particularly when he gets that devilish grin, I see his Nana coming through.

I have many beautiful pictures of the two of them together. The affection between them was deep and genuine. She passed away when my son was 16, but he still speaks of her often, knows she's waiting to see him in Heaven-house (Have you watched Disney's Coco?)

Despair and Your Special Needs Child

Children are a natural fountain of hope. Every parent has high hopes for their child's future. Even devoted pessimists harbor secret hopes for a better future for their children. Parents often forge dreams of their child's future greatness, hoping to live vicariously through them. When you realize your child has special needs, these dreams and hopes are dashed. Many parents lose all hope for their child. The absence of hope is despair.

A special needs child provides ample opportunities to wallow in despair. Spending time focusing on their deficiencies will inevitably lead you there. Since there's nothing you can do to change their fundamental condition, any time spent in despair is utterly wasted. Despair drains your energy and motivation and provides nothing in return.

When I realized my son had autism, I saw no possible good that could come from it. I lost hope for myself, my family, and my son. I accepted despair as my fate, and it eventually became a sickening, low-grade depression.

Combating despair requires rigorous mental discipline. Many people don't want to engage in any kind of discipline, particularly a difficult mental and emotional one. Those people often remain trapped in despair, occasionally escaping into denial to relieve the anguish.

The mind easily and naturally repeats false negative narratives. It's as if the mind creates a loop of negative thoughts and plays it endlessly, over and over. These negative thoughts get burned into your mind and heart, unintentionally, and to your terrible detriment.

My false negative narratives included some really harmful ones: Autism was nothing but bad in every way, and no possible good could ever come from it. My life, my wife's life, and my son's life would be a terrible struggle forever. There was no hope of our lives improving since his autism was permanent. It was pointless to consider other ways of looking at the situation because I already "knew" the awful truth.

These thoughts morph into a quick and nearly silent refrain, like background music. You don't consciously realize you're thinking these thoughts unless you pay attention to them. They fade into your subconscious mind, like a distant conversation you're trying not to hear. Sometimes, these thoughts get emotionally triggered and are called to the attention of your conscious mind. This directs your attention and energizes these thoughts emotionally. You feel a dose of negative energy and a release of neurochemicals that brings you down, triggering other related negative thoughts and putting you on a train of thought leading straight to pain and suffering.

THE LOOP OF ENDLESS SUFFERING

Whenever this sequence starts, it must be redirected immediately. Noticing the pattern and choosing to cut it off by redirection is a mental discipline. If you don't engage in this practice, you'll follow that train of thought over and over again. Each time, it leads to misery. The more often you do it, the worse the problem gets. Your mood is certain to sour, and you can become depressed or remain locked in depression.

You need a list of counterbalancing thoughts you can rely on to change the narrative. To successfully redirect, you need a series of positive items to think about instead. When I've asked people to come up with such a list, most stare at me with a blank expression. Their minds have been so trained by negativity that they can't conceive of anything even remotely positive. I was stuck in that place too, and it took significant effort to change it.

It isn't necessary or helpful to dwell on negative thoughts, particularly if there is nothing you can do about them. It's about applying the wisdom of the serenity prayer. Whenever negative thoughts arise, it should serve as a signal to redirect your thinking toward something else. Your goal is to shorten to zero the time between when you realize you're starting a stream of negative thoughts and when you apply the redirect.

I have certain facts about my son that I refuse to dwell on because they merely trigger negative feelings I can't do anything about: His intellectual development is that of an 8-year-old. He can't safely cross a street on his own. He will always need 24/7 care and supervision. He will never have a wife and family. He has no friends and probably never will. As his immediate family dies off, he will live out his life alone. He will never experience many things most people take for granted.

Even making this list was painful, and I could feel myself staring down the abyss of despair. These are facts, and I acknowledge them, but it would be pointless and counterproductive to dwell on them. If you have a similar list

and find yourself dwelling on these facts, you will become trapped in despair. It's imperative that you learn to stop thinking about these things and direct your thinking elsewhere.

I have a "go-to" list for whenever some incident or thought triggers negative feelings about my son's circumstances. I've trained myself to remember what I'm thankful for, even without being triggered by some negative thought or event.

I remind myself constantly of these things: He loves me openly. He is my friend and constant companion. He talks to me. He doesn't defy me. I have the privilege of spending the rest of my life with him. He genuinely enjoys my company. He appreciates the activities we share. His smile brings joy to my heart. He is in good health. He can walk. He can perform most routine grooming and self-care tasks. He gives my life and spiritual practice depth and meaning. I owe all my spiritual growth to him.

When I redirect my thoughts to this list, I find myself not only avoiding despair but actually feeling genuine gratitude for the gift my son has been in my life. It takes practice, but this mental redirection has been life-changing for me. Your list will be different, but if you make your list and refer to it ~~often~~ always, It could change your life, too.

TROUBLED WATER

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF WHAT YOU NEVER HAD

The day I finally accepted my son's diagnosis, I sat and wept. Not just a few quiet tears, but deep, body-shaking sobs that seemed to come from somewhere ancient inside me. I wasn't just crying for my son—I was mourning the death of a dream.

When you realize you have a special needs child, you will grieve. There's simply no way around it. You had a vision of who your child would be, what your family would look like, the life you would share together. Then suddenly, that vision shattered. You lost the dream of your perfect, typical child, and instead, you obtained something you didn't want or expect. Emotionally processing and accepting these truths is grief, and there is no avoiding the experience.

I don't say this to discourage you, but to normalize what you're feeling. The sooner you recognize that grief is a natural and necessary process, the sooner you can begin to move through it with purpose rather than simply being dragged along by it. How you process your grief will determine what you do about your circumstances. If you lash out in anger and retreat into denial, both you and your child will suffer. Your need to grieve doesn't remove your child's special needs. While you grieve, you will still need to devote yourself to meeting your child's needs. This might sound overwhelming—how can you possibly tend to a special needs child when you can barely function yourself? But here's the truth I discovered: helping your child is not a distraction or a burden. It's the path to your recovery.

With help and awareness, you can shorten this process. You can avoid sinking into depression. You can find meaning and joy on the other side. And in the process, you'll better serve your child who needs you now more than ever.

We all process grief differently. While the process can be described in general terms, each person finds their own path. I'm trying in this book to guide you to a quicker and less painful journey by pointing out the pitfalls along the way. That doesn't mean the way I describe is the only way or the best way for everyone. By far the most common and most harmful thing you can do with your spouse is to judge and criticize them for how they handle grief. I've seen this destroy marriages that were otherwise strong. Your partner isn't grieving "wrong"—they're just grieving differently than you are.

SUPPORTING EACH OTHER THROUGH LOSS

To meltdown or not to meltdown, that is the question. When it comes to grieving as a couple, there are a few paths I've observed. If both spouses become overwhelmed with grief, it needs to be brief for the family to still function. If this leads to a catharsis and quick recovery, it may actually be the better method, as each spouse can process a great deal of grief quickly by "crying it out." But if it leads to a prolonged period of deep mourning, it can lead to depression, which helps nobody. And if both parents are in full meltdown mode and withdrawing from the world, who is taking care of their special needs child?

If neither spouse melts down, they can both process their grief while doing what's necessary for their family. This circumstance is certainly easier on the parents and the child, but if one or both are in denial, it isn't leading to acceptance. My wife and I were fortunate in that we both processed our grief this way. We both were very sad and

cried often, but we didn't succumb to feelings of overwhelm or withdraw from the world, and we mutually supported each other. Neither of us became depressed, though the sadness took many months to pass. And critically, neither of us looked down in righteous judgment at the way the other handled our situation.

If one spouse melts down and the other doesn't, both are prone to judge each other negatively. When one spouse feels the news is too much to bear and completely breaks down, they often do so with the full expectation that the other spouse should feel exactly the same way. The more emotionally distraught spouse might claim the other is in denial, unfeeling, and should be just as upset as they are. The less distraught spouse might claim the other is a "weak snowflake" that needs to "get over it" and get on with life.

As each spouse hardens in their respective positions, animosity builds between them. This is one of the prime contributors to the high divorce rate among special needs parents. If you find yourselves in this situation, please remember that different grieving styles don't indicate different levels of love for your child. They simply reflect different emotional processing systems.

THE POWER OF NON-JUDGMENT

The traditional interpretation of grief stages suggests a linear progression from one stage to the next. But this doesn't explain why these stages occur, doesn't reflect the recursive nature of grief, doesn't provide a conceptual reasoning for why the process unfolds as it does, and doesn't mention that bargaining is a form of denial. The reality is much more complex and chaotic.

Your mind judges every thought and experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The natural reaction is to pull toward pleasant things, push away unpleasant things, or ignore neutral things. All thoughts and experiences carry emotional content. Mostly these are not strong or intense and are barely noticeable. But sometimes, these thoughts and experiences are powerful enough to overwhelm us. The emotional reaction to judgment can be lessened with intentional practice. We can learn to reduce the certainty of our judgments to reduce their impact. We can learn to reduce the importance we place on our judgments. Reducing the certainty and importance of judgments lessens the highs and lows that disturb our peace of mind.

But here's the tricky part: your mind doesn't just think these thoughts once. It puts thoughts and experiences on loops and plays them back over and over again. If an experience is emotionally powerful, your mind doesn't want to forget it. These loops are constantly playing in your subconscious. The cumulative effect of all these emotional feedback loops is your mood, and these tend to be dominated by negative experiences.

When you have a strongly emotional experience—like learning your child has special needs—your mind creates a loop and plays it back over and over again. It amplifies the effect. It determines your moods and state of mind for long periods. When the experience is negative, it can lead to depression if not processed properly. The mind tends to focus more on negative feelings and experiences—it's a survival instinct to avoid danger, hunger, and pain. It requires mental discipline and training to focus on positive feelings, especially in the midst of grief.

Our mental judgments create negative feelings, which is why non-judgment is a profound spiritual practice. There are three events that carry negative feelings: failing to obtain something you wanted, getting something you didn't want, and losing something you had. These events are very common and occur thousands of times a day in varying degrees. The negative feeling they generate is automatic, and it creates sadness. The depth of sadness is directly related to the degree of desire and attachment. The stronger your attachment to the idea of a typical child,

the deeper your sadness will be when facing a different reality. The natural reaction to negative feelings is to push them away with anger. A secondary reaction is to avoid them, ignore them, or deny the feelings exist altogether.

Learning to Accept What Is

Acceptance is the emotional clearing of the negative feelings generated by the loss of attachment. Anger and denial are easy and natural, but unfortunately, they're also harmful and counterproductive in the long run. Embracing sadness must be chosen—the reaction is not automatic. Embracing what feels negative is not instinctual or intuitive. It often requires training through spiritual practice and cultivating the belief that sadness is the path to wholeness and healing. It's a decision to drop all resistance to what is.

Embracing and enduring sadness is how people accept whatever happens in life. It's not easy, but it's the only path that leads to true peace. Grief is the processing of anger, denial, and sadness. Acceptance isn't just learning to live with your situation despite your pain. True acceptance is a return of joy and happiness—not in spite of what happened, but because of what happened. Acceptance is the state of mind where you are no longer disturbed by the three emotions of anger, denial, and sadness. You've processed them fully and moved beyond them.

Life need not be a series of disappointments that accumulate into depression, but this is exactly what happens when people don't grieve properly. Many people live in a state of low-grade depression, constantly fighting off sadness through anger, resistance, denial, and bargaining. But suppression doesn't succeed—it only prolongs the pain.

Grief and Forrest Gump

If you have a special needs child, the movie Forrest Gump will likely stir deep emotions in you. The film artfully and poignantly illustrates both the difficulties and possibilities of a life with special needs. There's a scene after Jenny leaves Forrest where he is overcome with grief and starts to run.

He runs across the country and keeps running. He runs for years and gains a cult following. He isn't fully aware of why he's running—he just feels compelled to run. He has no agenda, no political statement, no desire to influence others.

As viewers, we have the context of the movie, and we know he's running from his grief over losing Jenny from his life. What nobody knows, even Forrest himself, is how much grief he has to process and how long he will need to keep running.

At some point, he's run through his sadness, and he simply stops running and announces he wants to go home. Such is the way of processing grief.

Nobody knows how much sadness they must digest. Nobody knows how long it takes. When it's over, your mind just stops thinking about it, and it's over.

This running sequence is a perfect analogy for processing grief. Sometimes you just have to keep moving forward until one day, without warning, you realize the heaviest part of your burden has lifted.

THE SWIMMING ANALOGY

I like to think of the journey to acceptance as embarking on a long-distance swim in troubled water. Water is symbolic of emotions—it can be turbulent and difficult to swim in. Drowning in these emotions leads to depression. The length of the journey depends on how much sadness you need to endure to reach acceptance.

When you start, you often can't see the distant shore. You feel like you're entering an abyss or an endless ocean. But there is an opposite shore of complete acceptance, even if you can't see it yet. It often takes faith to start the journey.

Denial and bargaining are like islands of respite along the journey. If you don't stop at an island to rest occasionally, you risk drowning in depression. But if you stay too long on an island or mistake it for the shore of acceptance, you'll never reach solid ground.

The journey to the shore of acceptance is a grueling swim through an ocean of sadness with brief respites on islands of denial. It's exhausting. It's frightening. Sometimes it feels endless. But I promise you—the shore is there. And when you reach it, you'll find not just dry land, but a new perspective that will transform how you see your child, your life, and yourself.

I know because I've made that swim. I've reached that shore. And though the journey nearly broke me at times, what I found on the other side was worth every difficult stroke.

ANGRY YOUNG FAMILIES

THE PERILS OF ANGER

The morning I fully realized my son wasn't going to catch up with his peers, I slammed my coffee mug down so hard that it cracked. My wife flinched. I didn't apologize. I was too busy being furious at the world, at our circumstances, at her, at myself—though I wasn't ready to admit that last part yet.

Anger is seductive. It feels powerful when everything else in your life feels out of control. It gives you energy and motivation to act—in unwise and destructive ways. But like most dangerous attractions, anger promises protection while quietly destroying everything you care about. I spent years learning this lesson the hard way. I hope by sharing my journey, I might help you find a shorter path through the wilderness than the one I chose.

BREAKING FREE FROM ANGER

Anger is an unpleasant feeling generated by a negative state of mind. Anger seems simple on the surface—that hot flush in your cheeks, the tightness in your chest, the words that spill out before you can catch them. But beneath that surface reaction lies a complex mental process that happens so automatically we rarely notice it.

Of all our emotional disturbances, anger announces itself most clearly. There's no mistaking its presence when it fills your body and mind. It doesn't sneak in like anxiety or depression sometimes can. It kicks the door down and makes itself at home.

For anger to arise, your mind must first focus on something specific—a person, situation, or event. You decide (often unconsciously) that this focus is undesirable or problematic. Then something fascinating happens: you zoom in exclusively on the negative aspects of whatever you're focused on, magnifying them while completely filtering out any positive or neutral qualities. This mental close-up creates a distorted picture.

The doctor who delivered a difficult diagnosis becomes "that horrible doctor who ruined our lives." The school administrator who suggested a different classroom for your child becomes "that heartless bureaucrat who labeled my baby." This exaggeration isn't intentional—it's how anger warps our perception.

Next, you assign blame. "That doctor caused this pain." "My spouse's family history created this problem." "The school system is making everything worse." Notice how in each case, responsibility shifts outward, away from yourself. Finally, anger creates a powerful urge to push away, harm, or eliminate whatever you've identified as the problem. This desire to attack or escape is what we recognize as the feeling of anger.

I wish I could tell you this process is rare, but we encounter triggers for anger thousands of times each day in varying degrees. The good news—and I mean this sincerely—is that each of these occasions gives us a chance to practice acceptance and grow. Each moment of potential anger becomes an opportunity for spiritual development.

Most importantly, understanding this process shows us something crucial: anger isn't an inevitable response to outside circumstances. It's created through a series of mental steps that we can interrupt at any point.

This means each of us is 100% responsible for our own anger. That's a hard truth to swallow, but embracing it is the first step toward freedom. With practice in acceptance, non-retaliation, and forgiveness, anyone can overcome anger. Eventually, it simply stops arising in situations where it once felt unavoidable.

ANGER FROM LOSS

Most people react to loss with anger. When I first suspected my son might have autism, my immediate reaction wasn't grief or concern. It was rage. Pure, unfiltered rage. Anger is the path of least resistance. It requires no discipline, no maturity, no spiritual strength. It just happens. And like most things in life that come easily and naturally, anger is ~~rarely~~ never helpful.

What we don't often recognize is that anger actually functions as a shield against sadness. The heat of rage feels better than the cold emptiness of loss. Anger gives us something to do with our pain—somewhere to direct it besides inward. "I'm not heartbroken that my child won't have the life I imagined," we tell ourselves. "I'm FURIOUS at the doctor who missed the signs," or "I'm OUTRAGED at the school system that won't provide proper support."

Anger provides a false sense of strength when we feel most vulnerable. When you're angry, your body floods with adrenaline. Your heart pounds. You feel powerful, ready for action. This fight-or-flight response has its place in true emergencies, but as a chronic state, it's devastating to your health, relationships, and spirit. Some people manage to forge their anger into determination, and that can sometimes look like progress. "I'll fight this diagnosis," or "I'll find a cure no matter what it takes." But determination fueled by anger feels like having a gun to your head. It's exhausting, unsustainable, and ultimately harmful. Anger is designed for quick bursts in response to immediate threats—not as a long-term motivational strategy.

ANGER IS NOT "OUT THERE"

Anger is not caused by the outside world, despite our beliefs to the contrary. Do these sound familiar? "You make me so angry!" or "If the insurance company hadn't denied our claim, I wouldn't be furious right now." or "Anyone would be angry in my situation." I've said all of them and more. Most of us grow up believing that our anger is a reasonable response to unreasonable circumstances. This belief is profoundly comforting because it absolves us of responsibility.

If something or someone else causes our anger, then what choice do we have? We're merely responding naturally, right? And if we're not responsible for becoming angry, then surely we can't be held fully accountable for what we say or do while angry. It's a convenient story we tell ourselves, and it's entirely false.

The truth—and I learned this through years of painful self-reflection—is exactly the opposite of what we tend to believe:

- Anger is not caused by other people or their behavior
- Anger is not caused by external events
- Anger is neither unavoidable nor uncontrollable

These statements might seem radical, especially if you're in the midst of a situation that feels anger-worthy. But I promise you, accepting these truths is the beginning of freedom from the tyranny of your own emotions. The first step toward overcoming anger is recognizing that you are 100% responsible for it. No one "makes" you angry. You create your anger through your own thought processes, and therefore, you have the power to uncreate it.

DON'T BLAME OTHERS FOR YOUR ANGER

Some people treat every interaction like an accounting exercise, mentally recording each perceived slight or offense. They're constantly evaluating, judging, and assigning blame. Interestingly, they rarely keep similar records of kindnesses or positive actions—just the negative balance. This mental ledger of grievances becomes dangerous in two ways. First, it provides ready ammunition for future arguments. ("Well, what about last Christmas when you said...") Second, it feeds feelings of resentment and jealousy that poison relationships from within.

Blaming others for our anger serves one primary purpose: it relieves us of responsibility. Human nature stubbornly resists accepting fault, especially for unpleasant emotions. It's much easier to say, "You made me angry" than "I chose to become angry in response to your actions."

When we assign responsibility for our anger to others, we make it nearly impossible to resolve. After all, if someone else caused the problem, only they can fix it. We become helpless victims of others' behavior rather than masters of our own emotional responses. The habit of assigning blame also hardens into resentment and hatred over time. The longer we maintain our grievance ledgers, the more enemies we create, and the more bitterness we carry.

Even when someone genuinely wrongs us—and yes, that happens—maintaining anger only compounds our suffering. The person who practices patience and refuses to harbor ill will has fewer enemies and, somewhat paradoxically, experiences less harm from others. This isn't easy.

"Justifiable" anger is the hardest to overcome precisely because the justifications often feel so legitimate. Your anger might be completely understandable to everyone. You might have every right to be furious. But feeling and sustaining that anger still carries all the negative consequences, regardless of how warranted it seems.

I'm not suggesting you become everyone's doormat or ignore genuine problems. You can still make sound judgments about who deserves your trust and time without maintaining a catalog of grievances. There are people I prefer not to spend time with, but I don't carry anger toward them. Instead, I feel compassion for their challenges while choosing not to get entangled in their drama. The "blame game" isn't about setting reasonable boundaries—it's about sustaining anger through careful recordkeeping of others' faults. And it serves no one, least of all yourself.

ANGER AND YOUR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

When I finally realized my son wasn't developing typically, I hit what I call the "anger trifecta":

- I didn't get something I desired (a neurotypical child)
- I lost something I thought I had (my imagined future with a typical child)
- I got something I didn't desire (a lifetime of specialized caregiving)

And it wasn't about something trivial—it was about my family, my legacy, my whole life plan. The stakes couldn't have been higher, which made the anger burn that much hotter. I focused obsessively on the condition, judged it as terrible, resisted accepting the truth with every fiber of my being, and desperately wanted to change reality. In short, I created perfect conditions for anger to flourish.

Then I went looking for someone to blame.

I somehow managed to ignore my own family history of developmental differences. I conveniently forgot about questionable choices I'd made during my wife's pregnancy. I was mysteriously blind to every possible way I might have contributed to the situation.

Why? Because at my core, I secretly believed I was perfect and blameless. It sounds ridiculous saying it out loud now, but that's the nonsense I told myself.

So if it wasn't my fault, whose fault was it? My wife's, obviously. She must have terrible genes. She probably ate something wrong during pregnancy. For no rational reason other than self-protection, I decided it simply had to be her fault, because there were only two of us involved, and I had already declared myself innocent. Angry people don't mind being complete jerks, and I was no exception.

Some people handle this differently. They might suppress their anger, deny it, or try to ignore it entirely. I didn't bother with such detours. I just became very, very angry. Anger toward a spouse is an extremely common first reaction to a special needs diagnosis. Some people, like me, blame their partner directly for the condition. Others don't blame their spouse for the diagnosis itself but get furious about how their partner responds to it.

The truth is, everyone reacts to tragedy differently. Some people accept difficult news quickly and move into problem-solving mode. Others completely fall apart and sink into despair. Still others retreat into denial and act as if nothing has changed. When parents have different reactions, they often get angry with each other about those differences.

The stoic parent sees the emotional one as weak or dramatic. The emotional parent views the stoic one as cold and uncaring. Each becomes convinced their reaction is the only appropriate one, and the other must be wrong. This judgment creates marital conflict exactly when couples need unity most. Parents often reach out to friends or family for validation that their approach is right and their partner's is wrong. Arguments escalate, animosity builds, and resentment drives a wedge between people who desperately need each other's support.

Even when parents react similarly, it doesn't guarantee a healthy response. If both parents retreat into denial, they might delay seeking necessary interventions. If both collapse into despair, they can pull each other deeper into depression as each feeds the other's negativity.

Some parents direct their anger at their child. Obviously, a child didn't choose their condition, but that doesn't prevent some people from blaming them anyway. I didn't fall into this particular trap, partly because I knew my son wasn't responsible, but mostly because I already had a more convenient target in my wife.

Other parents get angry at their own parents—the child's grandparents. "They gave me these defective genes," or "They fed me too much junk food growing up, which damaged my DNA," or "Their generation poisoned the environment and created this epidemic of developmental disorders." (That last one was actually my pet theory for years, though I had zero evidence for it.)

I personally didn't waste much energy being angry at my parents. Since I was taking absolutely no personal responsibility, I didn't need to deflect any blame their way. If I had felt even slightly responsible myself, I probably would have found a way to scapegoat them too.

IT'S GOD'S FAULT

Many people, especially those with religious backgrounds, direct their anger toward God or fate. They might outwardly deny this anger—after all, good believers aren't supposed to question divine wisdom—but inwardly, they rage against what feels like cosmic injustice.

"Why would God give me this burden?"

"What sin did I commit to deserve this punishment?"

"How could a loving God let an innocent child suffer?"

I didn't focus my anger on God, not because I was above doing so, but simply because I wasn't a believer at the time. Instead, I raged against my misfortune and "bad luck." I knew a little about karma then, and I could have viewed my situation as the result of my own past actions. I could have taken responsibility that way. But I wasn't in any mood to accept anything, least of all responsibility.

I misunderstood karma back then anyway. Some interpretations suggest that having a special needs child is punishment for previous sin or transgression. This view presupposes that having a special needs child is inherently bad, and therefore you must have done something bad to deserve it.

What a tragic misunderstanding.

When you eventually realize that your special needs child is a profound blessing, you begin to wonder what great deed you must have done in your past to deserve such an honor. If I had a past life, perhaps in it I failed to achieve the spiritual growth I longed for and needed something more powerful to guide me. Having a special needs child has made me a better person, forced me to grow in spirit, and improved my life in immeasurable ways. I now believe I must have lived with great virtue to have earned such an opportunity for growth.

Where did all that initial anger go? For many years, I stuffed it away inside. It burned as a secret resentment for over a decade. It changed forms as my understanding grew. But it wasn't until I truly saw my child as a gift that it fully dissipated.

If you've felt any or all of these angry responses, please know you are not alone. And if you claim you haven't felt any of them, you're either an extraordinary saint or so deep in denial that you're lying to yourself. Everyone goes through this to some degree.

Hopefully, you've begun to recognize the futility of anger and blame. If you haven't yet overcome your anger, please know that you have emotional work to do. The important thing isn't whether you've felt anger—it's what you do with that anger and how you move past it.

RESENTMENT AND YOUR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

When you discovered your child was different, if you're like most parents, you got angry. The question now is: where did that anger go? Is it completely gone from your heart, or is it hiding in some forgotten corner of your mind? Anger that persists over time hardens into resentment, a chronic, low-grade hostility that colors everything in your life.

Do you resent having a special needs child? I did for about 16 years. My resentment lurked in the background. I would have vehemently denied its existence if anyone had asked. But it was there, whispering to me that I was burdened, held back from achieving greatness, unfairly constrained by circumstances.

I was a fool.

Do you resent your child for needing your help? Most parents expect their children to eventually achieve independence, move out, and allow them to enjoy their later years with the freedom to travel, pursue hobbies, or simply relax. When a child can't achieve independence, parents face the reality of lifelong caregiving.

That's my situation, and possibly yours too. This reality of lifelong dependency typically unfolds in one of three ways:

First, some parents grow openly resentful of the "burden" and often seek institutional care to relieve themselves of responsibility.

Second, others grimly accept their duty and care for their child for life, secretly resenting the sacrifice but carrying on from a sense of obligation. This group sometimes becomes prideful about their martyrdom, wearing their sacrifice as a badge of honor.

Third, some parents come to see their role as a blessing—something they feel honored to do and thankful for the opportunity to experience. This is the path I eventually chose.

Which one will be your fate?

Almost nobody willingly admits to feelings of resentment toward their special needs child. Such an admission feels shameful, even monstrous. But many harbor these feelings anyway, often without fully acknowledging them even to themselves. If you haven't fully accepted your special needs child—truly accepted them exactly as they are—you're likely harboring some hidden anger and resentment. Until you feel this resentment and see it clearly for what it is, you cannot release it. Once you recognize its presence, you can practice forgiveness and acceptance to make it go away.

NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM ANGER

Anger disturbs your peace of mind. It's not a pleasant feeling, despite the momentary illusion of power it provides. It compels you to hurt other people—sometimes physically, but more often with words or withdrawal of affection. These actions inevitably lead to regret.

In fact, anger is the direct path to lifelong regret. It fills your mind with toxic, negative thoughts that pollute your perspective on everything else in your life. Physically, it elevates your blood pressure and contributes to heart disease and other health problems.

Anger is ultimately self-defeating. It promises strength but delivers weakness. It promises justice but creates new injustices. It promises resolution but perpetuates conflict.

Some people touch the hot stove of anger briefly, then immediately retreat into denial. Denial feels less painful in the moment. Many believe they can somehow reach acceptance by completely avoiding or ignoring the painful reality.

But avoidance doesn't purge negative thoughts and feelings from your mind. It merely pushes them out of conscious awareness temporarily. The diagnosis—that thing you're trying so hard not to see—remains firmly rooted in your subconscious.

This buried negativity is like a weed with hidden roots. It spreads beneath the surface, eventually overtaking your emotional landscape, destroying your peace, and often leading to depression.

The path through grief offers no shortcuts. You can't skip the hard parts and still reach genuine acceptance. As we'll explore in the next chapter, denial might feel safer than anger, but it creates its own particular kind of prison.

REASONS TO BELIEVE

DENIAL IS WILLFUL IGNORANCE

I want to talk to you about something difficult but necessary: denial. I've been there myself, and I know how tempting it can be to hide from painful truths. Denial isn't just simple ignorance—it's a chosen ignorance, a deliberate turning away from what's right in front of us because the reality hurts too much.

Here's what happens: Something is true, and deep down you know it's true, but you refuse to believe it. You push away those lingering suspicions, those quiet moments when reality tries to break through. If you weren't consciously ignoring or suppressing these truths, it wouldn't be denial at all—it would be not knowing.

People who are particularly skilled at denial often don't even realize they're doing it. They'll say things like, "I'm just not sure yet" or "I'm waiting for more information before making up my mind." They actively search for any scrap of evidence that contradicts reality while ignoring the mountain of evidence supporting it.

But here's the hard truth I learned: denying reality doesn't change it. Not one bit. And making decisions based on what we wish were true instead of what is true leads to poor outcomes—sometimes dangerous ones.

Think about it this way: if you deny a traffic light is red when passing through an intersection, you risk causing an accident that could harm you and others. In medicine, denial kills when people ignore early warning signs of disease until treatment is no longer effective. With a special needs child, denial can be just as harmful—it means failing to get proper assistance for a child who desperately needs it.

My own denial was mercifully short-lived. During my son's first 18 months, I practiced willful ignorance even though the signs were obvious and numerous. When my wife finally showed me a list of signs for autism, I knew immediately it was true. I couldn't muster much denial after that moment of realization—my son's condition was severe enough that the ray of hope that people often expand into full-blown denial simply wasn't available to me.

I want you to understand something important: denial has one useful function, and only one. When emotions become too intense, too difficult, or too prolonged, your mind will seek ways to lapse into denial as a safety measure to avoid depression. It usually takes the form of bargaining—believing that some action will make the undesirable problem disappear. Both bargaining and denial provide a welcome break from processing sadness.

But this needs to be a temporary pause, a rest stop on your journey—not the final destination. When someone remains stuck in denial, they aren't making progress toward acceptance. This is where those snake oil treatments and false hopes take root. Grasping at miracle cures is a common form of bargaining, and it can waste precious resources—time, money, emotional energy—on treatments that won't help. Because the hard truth is, for many conditions, there is no cure.

DENIAL AND THE SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

For many parents, the reality of having a special needs child is deemed too difficult to accept. Denial seems like the easier road to travel because the pain of acceptance feels too great. "My child does not have special needs" becomes a shield against that pain. I've seen it happen countless times: denial becomes a mechanism to avoid the sadness that comes with acceptance. Some people would rather be impervious to reality than feel any pain at all.

One way parents sustain this denial is by refusing to seek a diagnosis—because an objective opinion from an expert is hard to deny. That's why people avoid it.

I remember the doctor who finally diagnosed my son actually chastised us. At first, I was offended, but later I realized she was probably tired of seeing children brought in well after the signs were obvious. The result of refusing to obtain a diagnosis is often a lack of proper medical care, and that's not doing right by your child.

Another form of denial is refusing to seek government assistance. After all, you don't need to fix a problem you don't have. If you deny having a problem, you won't bother seeking out help for it. Some parents are philosophically opposed to assistance due to their political beliefs. But your family and your child pay a high price for this stance.

I need to tell you something that still causes me pain to admit. When my son was young, we didn't apply for the assistance programs we were eligible for. My wife couldn't work because our son needed 24/7 supervision. My state offers payment for this service as in-home care, but I carried the false belief that by obtaining assistance, I was taking it from a more "deserving" family. I also didn't feel we needed it because I saw myself as a good provider.

My ignorance, arrogance, and stubbornness cost my family thousands of dollars a month in aid and services for my son. I didn't apply for one important program for nearly 10 years after we became eligible. The opportunity cost in lost assistance to my family was well over $100,000. I put my family through unnecessary hardship due to my failure to seek the proper assistance to which we were entitled. An entitlement granted by a State that recognizes we have a huge financial burden other families simple don't have. I feel strong remorse over these bad decisions.

Please don't make the same mistake I did. My wife did not work so she could provide our son the care he needed. The loss of income could have been made up by state assistance. This can be a significant, life-changing amount. And even if your state or country provides little support, anything is better than nothing. Your pride is expensive.

DIAGNOSIS SHOPPING

Another form of denial I see often is parents who say, "My child doesn't fit under that label." They argue that labels are harmful because they cast an identity that can be difficult to overcome. And there's some truth here—nobody is a label, and labels can create limitations that aren't real. But a diagnosis doesn't need to become a label. You can accept the diagnosis, seek appropriate treatment, and reject the limiting aspects of the label. But please, don't fight the label as a way of avoiding the diagnosis.

The faulty thinking goes like this: if we avoid the diagnosis or the label, my child doesn't have a problem. I know a family that went to four different physicians to obtain a diagnosis. The first three diagnosed autism of varying degrees, but they kept lobbying for a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, which they considered preferable since it's on the less severe end of the spectrum.

On their fourth attempt, they finally got the result they wanted: "pervasive development disorder with autism-like tendencies." They were relieved that their child was "not autistic." Their denial was affirmed. They spent all that money and effort to support their denial, but the diagnosis didn't change their child. That fourth doctor probably knew about the previous diagnoses and chose to tell them what they wanted to hear to stop their doctor shopping. Denying the correct diagnosis also prevents you from seeking proper treatment or assistance.

I've also seen what I call "denial lite"—minimizing the implications of reality. While exaggerating a child's problems for attention is harmful (though rare), more commonly, people attempt to minimize the true condition out of fear or shame.

Have you heard or uttered any of these?

"My child is normal, but a little odd."

"My child needs a little help, but is not special needs."

"My child's condition is not as bad as the doctors make it out to be."

"My child will grow out of it."

Again, this is counterproductive because it means parents won't seek appropriate help.

I've noticed that parents often minimize their child's condition to avoid being ostracized. Parents have a tendency to keep their children away from those who are more severely affected. Typical children rarely want special needs children around, while parents of special needs children want their children to play with typical children. "More typical" is always considered better, so parents pretend their child is less severely affected than they really are.

DENIAL OF RESPONSIBILITY

It's common in the early stages of acceptance to admit the problem is real but to deflect any responsibility to others. Parents will seek someone to blame for the condition itself.

Some blame doctors: "My child was poisoned by vaccines" or "Something happened during childbirth."

Others blame the school: "The teachers are bad" or "The teachers don't understand my child."

And sadly, many blame their spouse like I did.

All attempts to assign responsibility are wrong because we simply don't know what causes autism. Some of the sources of personal blame are downright ridiculous: bad genes, bad diet, bad parenting, bad karma.

The blame game contributes to the high divorce rate among parents of special needs children. When one parent is in denial, that parent becomes an obstacle to treatment, thwarting the primal desire to help, and the parent pushing for treatment will be extremely upset, and rightly so. The parent in denial is hurting their child.

My wife and I each blamed each other and formed resentments over it. I have an uncle who is on the spectrum, and my wife concluded it was my "bad genetics" that were responsible. She said I should have told her about my family history—I guess she wouldn't have married me, right? One data point can be completely convincing if there's no other place to assign blame.

My counter-argument? My wife ate tuna during her pregnancy. Tuna is known to be high in mercury, and heavy metals—particularly mercury—have been falsely linked to autism.

I told her she should have known better than to eat tuna, and she was responsible. I didn't really believe it, but it seemed like a good retort at the time.

When we argued over this issue, we each came up with even more bizarre and far-fetched reasons why the other was responsible for our son's autism. Only the futility of the exercise finally prompted us to stop.

THE BUCK STOPS WHERE?

Let me ask you: what positive end result does assigning blame gain? Let's imagine that one of us is right, and the other person is responsible for our shared problem. It's still a shared problem that doesn't go away with blame. We are both equally responsible for solving it.

It's not like the party who is "not responsible" is no longer going to help with care. Well, some try to avoid helping, making the other parent responsible for fixing the problem the other supposedly created, but reality has a way of forcing selfish asses like that to get with the program.

What are we supposed to do with information on who is responsible for the cause? What possible useful decision or course of action can come from properly assigning blame? Would knowing it was my bad genes or her bad diet in any way suggest a course of treatment? If either one of us accepted this blame, we would have ended up feeling terrible about what we supposedly did. What good would come of that?

Should I feel bad for having a family member on the spectrum? Should she feel bad for eating tuna? Remorse has benefit if it prevents bad decisions in the future, but remorse has no benefit in this situation.

If you think rationally about the possible outcomes for assigning blame, you won't do it. First, you could never be sure you were correct. There is no known cause for autism, so any blame would be based on supposition, not fact. People are often quite certain in their blame and completely mistaken. Would it be appropriate to hold someone responsible for something they did not cause?

Second, if blame is accepted, it merely causes distress with no positive value. It's all cloud and no silver lining.

Third, if blame is rejected, it causes ongoing tension between parents as each blames the other and sustains anger over it, which hardens into resentment. Resentment against your spouse is a common cause of divorce.

For all these reasons, my wife and I stopped blaming each other and decided to put that energy into making our son's life better instead.

Beyond blaming others for the condition, parents in denial often seek to make others responsible for "curing" their child: "I can't solve it, so others must." They believe their child can be cured by doctors, social services, or the school system.

I was guilty of committing this error. We lived in a great school district with stellar services, and I felt good because I knew my son was getting the best education possible. But I used this to sustain my denial that he would be "cured" and completely overcome his autism.

I remember one of my son's early education meetings where I asked that he be made to "catch up" to his peers. The educators were gracious enough to remain silent and offer to do what they could. However, they could see my denial for what it was. They could have stated his limitations; his future was clear to his caregivers.

But I didn't want to hear the truth. It probably would have made me angry if they had told me because my denial and resistance to reality wouldn't permit that to be true.

Some parents believe their child can be cured by faith or their social network. While it's good to have support, it's wrong to believe this support will "fix" your child. Blaming others and making others responsible for curing your child is not productive or helpful in any way.

THE PROBLEMS WITH DENIAL

The key to overcoming any disturbing emotion is to focus on the problems that pattern of thought and feeling creates. Denial creates many problems, and I want to share them with you so you can recognize them.

First, there's the relentless resistance of reality. Despite my determination and effort, my son was not "cured" because he was not ill, merely different. The despair remained, and I got used to the feeling. Only denial and the desire to find a cure pulled me out temporarily. At the time, I wished I had better techniques for dealing with despair, but I thought the best alternative was to find a solution to my son's autism. Unfortunately, I didn't know then that seeking a cure is merely a path to denial. I was wrong, so the despair hung around while I jousted with windmills.

My irresistible force of determination encountered the immovable object of reality. You can't change what is through force of will. The belief that you can is a source of tremendous suffering. As the Borg from Star Trek said, "Resistance is futile." As the Buddha noted, "It is your resistance to what is that causes your suffering."

Let me share a painful memory that illustrates this. Part of the reason I became an arrogant and prideful fool in my youth is due to the stellar scores I always obtained on standardized tests. I consistently scored in the top few percentiles in every area on every test I had ever taken. I was always told I was super smart and destined for great things. The result was numerous false and grandiose beliefs about myself that ended up hindering me for most of my life.

Since I had consistently done well on tests, I assumed my child would inherit my "brilliant genes," and he could compete with me growing up to see if he could score better. It didn't turn out that way. I used to dread the education meetings where we would discuss his results on standardized tests. My son scored literally on the other end of the testing spectrum. I guess it makes sense if I scored in the 99th percentile that someone out there had to score in the 1st percentile. I just never thought it would be my son.

1 IN 10,000

In one of the education assessments, they reported my son had scored in the 0.01 percentile. He literally obtained the worst score out of 10,000 people. In fact, it was probably worse than that as they only kept decimal precision to the second digit. That 0.01 percentile number was burned into my brain.

I don't remember the rest of the meeting, what was discussed or decided. The thought of 0.01 was so overpowering to me that I wanted to break down into tears right there. I held it together through the meeting, putting my emotions on a shelf for later processing.

The only thing I do remember from the meeting was when we signed the acknowledgment papers, I told them that they really should drop the decimal precision on their reporting. No parent wants to read that their child is in the bottom 0.01 percent. To this day, when I think about that score, it makes me sad.

Parents in denial are extremely unhappy. Denial of the obvious takes tremendous energy. Denial requires a constant influx of anger to maintain—cursing God or Fate. Parents often retreat into negative behaviors: alcoholism, drug abuse, workaholism, or family abandonment. Our culture is full of stories of heroic resistance winning out in the end. Unfortunately, in the real world, permanent resistance is a soul-draining path to a hollow defeat.

We met a couple in Irvine with two special needs children. The wife became a special needs teacher, and the father was devoted to both his children. I greatly admired both parents for their unwavering devotion. Unfortunately, I also felt very sad for them.

By the time their children were teenagers, the parents were completely defeated. You could see in their eyes the despair of 15+ years of sustained effort with so little to show for it—at least from their perspective, because they desperately wanted a cure. The look of defeat was palpable as they exuded a sad resignation.

They weren't interested in acceptance of their children's condition or finding ways to enjoy their children as they were. Sadly, as the father grew to accept their fate, the couple grew apart. The mother simply couldn't accept that her children would remain autistic. The couple ended up divorcing.

Denial leads to negative outcomes for both parents and children. The child doesn't get appropriate help, proven treatments for symptoms aren't implemented, and appropriate aid resources aren't utilized. The sooner you abandon your denial, the happier you will be, and your child will experience better life outcomes.

I know it's hard—believe me, I know. But on the other side of that pain is a peace I never thought possible. And your child deserves the best care possible, which can only come when you fully accept the reality of their condition.

FACING THE TRUTH

SADNESS IS THE GREAT LIBERATOR

The day I finally sat down and wept for my son—for the life I thought he would have, for the dreams I had carried—was the day my healing truly began. It wasn't pretty. There were no inspirational music swells in the background, no moment of transcendent understanding. Just me, alone, sobbing until my chest ached and my eyes burned. And yet, somehow, I felt lighter afterward. Not happier—not by a long shot—but as if something stuck inside me had finally begun to move.

Sadness is a necessary and healthy emotion leading to acceptance. Where anger pushes away what we can't bear to face, sadness pulls us toward what we need to embrace. This is why sadness, however painful, is ultimately the gateway to acceptance. You simply cannot accept what you're still resisting or pushing away.

SADNESS CLEANSES THE HEART

Think of it this way: anger builds walls, but sadness opens doors. When I was angry about my son's diagnosis, I was fighting against reality itself. When I allowed myself to feel sad, I was finally acknowledging that reality—taking the first step toward living within it rather than exhausting myself by fighting against it.

You might think that avoiding sadness will lead you more quickly to happiness. I certainly did. But I learned the hard way that you will not find lasting happiness until you've digested and processed the sadness that comes with having a child whose life will be different than you imagined. Embracing sadness is a difficult but essential part of your spiritual journey as a parent of a special needs child.

Grief is the processing of sadness. There's no shortcut around sadness to get to acceptance. Sadness must be endured to reach acceptance because acceptance is the opposite of resistance. When I finally accepted my son's autism, it wasn't because I'd found some magic trick to bypass grief—it was because I'd allowed myself to fully experience it.

I like to think of processing grief as a kind of emotional digestion. Sadness is a bitter drink that must be fully digested before your system can be nourished by acceptance. Just as our bodies need time to break down food, our hearts need time to break down grief.

Grief is processed by feeling sadness without resistance. The more you resist, the slower the processing goes. I spent months trying to "stay positive" and "be strong," but all I was doing was putting off the inevitable and slowing my own healing. When I finally surrendered to my sadness—when I gave myself permission to feel devastated—the process actually moved faster.

AVOIDANCE LEADS NOWHERE

Don't avoid the sadness that leads to acceptance. This is such a common mistake, and unfortunately, it leads to negative outcomes that can last for years. When we sidestep our sadness, we often fail to obtain the appropriate assistance for our children because we're still in denial about what they truly need. We might abdicate responsibility to others—teachers, therapists, family members—without being fully engaged ourselves.

Most harmful of all, avoiding sadness perpetuates a state of unhappiness because ignoring or suppressing sadness doesn't eliminate it—it drives it underground where it continues to affect everything you do and every decision you make.

I remember a father I met at a support group who prided himself on "never shedding a tear" over his daughter's diagnosis. Five years later, he was still jumping from therapy to therapy, still convinced the next treatment would "fix" her, still unable to connect with her as she was rather than as he wished she could be. His avoidance of sadness had kept him stuck in a cycle of denial and bargaining that prevented him from truly accepting and loving his daughter.

Sadness is not depression, but it can become depression. There is a problem with digesting too much sadness at once. Prolonged, unrelenting feelings of sadness can morph into depression, which is a very different beast. Sadness moves and changes; depression traps and paralyzes.

Sadness must be endured in reasonable doses. Too much leads to depression; too little prolongs recovery. And avoiding sadness altogether prevents reaching the final destination of acceptance.

This is where denial and bargaining can actually serve a purpose. They can provide respite from sadness when it becomes overwhelming. Moving between surrender to sadness and periods of denial and bargaining is essential to avoid depression. Denial isn't inherently bad when taken as respite. Bargaining isn't bad when it facilitates right action. Even anger, which I've cautioned against, can be transformed into determination to take positive steps for your child.

The danger comes when depression takes hold, because depression shuts down the processing entirely and promotes "stuckness"—that terrible state where nothing changes, nothing improves, and hope seems impossible.

GRIEF AND SADNESS

Nobody knows how much sadness they have to digest. Nobody knows how long it takes. When it's over, your mind just stops thinking about it, and it's over. My experience was that some days, I would feel ready to move through my sadness. Other days, I would wake up and feel as if I couldn't take it.

Grief isn't linear. It doesn't follow a timetable or respond to demands. It takes as long as it takes. But I promise you this: if you allow yourself to feel the sadness of having a child whose life will be different than you imagined, if you surrender to that grief without judgment or resistance, there will come a day when you simply stop hurting. And on that day, you'll be ready to accept of your child exactly as they are.

The sadness won't disappear entirely—it will revisit you at milestones, at school events where differences become more apparent, at birthday parties where your child stands apart. But these waves of sadness will no longer sweep you away. They'll come, and then they'll go, leaving behind not devastation but a deeper capacity for joy in the life you actually have, rather than the one you once imagined.

Sadness, when fully experienced, truly is the great liberator. It frees us from the exhausting work of denial, from the corrosive power of anger, from the endless hamster wheel of bargaining. It delivers us, finally, to acceptance—not as a consolation prize, but as the solid ground upon which we can build a meaningful life with our special children.

WANTING YOUR TYPICAL CHILD

THE PERILS OF JEALOUSY

The playground was crowded that afternoon. Children raced around, climbing, swinging, and shouting with joy. Parents chatted in small groups, occasionally calling out to their little ones.

I sat on a bench, watching my son rock back and forth in the sand, completely absorbed in his own world. A boy about his age ran past, stopped to look at him curiously, then dashed off to join his friends.

My heart ached. A familiar knot formed in my stomach—one I'd come to recognize all too well. It wasn't just sadness or worry. It was something darker, something that made me feel small and ashamed.

It was jealousy.

I was jealous toward parents with typical children.

JEALOUSY AND YOUR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

When you're the parent of a child with special needs, jealousy can become an unwelcome companion. I never expected to feel it so intensely. After all, I wasn't a particularly jealous person before. But there I was, watching other children reach milestones my son couldn't grasp, hearing parents casually complain about "problems" I would have given anything to have.

"Tommy just won't stop talking! He asks 'why' about everything!"

"Madison is so stubborn about what she wears. She changes outfits three times every morning!"

I'd smile and nod, while inside I thought: I wish my son could speak a single word. I wish he cared about what he wore.

The first time I recognized this jealousy, I felt terrible. What kind of parent begrudges another child's development? What kind of person resents a friend's happiness? But the feeling was persistent, and I eventually realized I wasn't alone in experiencing it.

When I first noticed my son was different—when I saw the growing gap between him and his peers—a simmering jealousy took root in my heart. I watched other parents at the playground, at school events, even at the grocery store, and I envied what they had: children who were developing normally. They possessed something I desperately wanted—a typical child.

But it wasn't just about developmental milestones. Associated with that typical child were all the dreams, hopes, and aspirations I had built for the future. College graduation. Wedding day. Grandchildren. The more I watched these typical families, the more these dreams seemed to slip through my fingers, and the jealousy grew deeper.

I felt shame that my child was so far behind, which only intensified my jealousy. Every birthday party invitation became a potential minefield. Every school concert highlighted what my child couldn't do.

If you're prone to feeling jealousy, having a special needs child provides endless opportunities to indulge in that emotion.

I remember one Christmas gathering where my nephew, three months younger than my son, recited a poem he had learned. The family clapped and cheered. I smiled and praised him too—but inside, I felt that familiar twist of envy and heartache.

Later, I stood in the bathroom, fighting back tears, angry at myself for feeling this way during what should have been a joyful family moment.

THE MANY FAULTS OF JEALOUSY

Jealousy, at its core, is displeasure with someone else's good fortune. You can become jealous of another's possessions, good qualities, skills, knowledge, reputation, fame, or popularity—basically anything another person has that you want. And when it comes to children, those wants run deep and raw.

There are plenty of strong reasons to purge jealousy from your heart and mind. First and foremost, jealousy is a source of anger, discontent, and mental disturbance. It creates a persistent ache that colors everything else in your life. When I was caught in its grip, even good days had a shadow hanging over them.

Jealousy can lead to obsession, a persistent mental disturbance that robs you of peace. I found myself scrolling through social media, looking at photos of my friends' children and feeling worse with each swipe. I'd catch myself thinking about other children's accomplishments while lying awake at night, unable to sleep.

Even more concerning, jealousy can lead to the desire to harm others—the opposite of compassion. I never wanted to hurt anyone, but I recognized the ugly thoughts that sometimes crossed my mind. *Why should they have it so easy? Why don't they appreciate what they have?* These thoughts weren't who I wanted to be.

Perhaps most practically, jealousy is a futile waste of time and energy. It doesn't increase your good qualities or improve your situation. It doesn't reduce the good qualities of others or change their circumstances. It only succeeds in disturbing your peace of mind, taking precious energy away from what truly matters—loving and supporting your child as they are.

JEALOUSY POISONS EVERYTHING IT TOUCHES

One of jealousy's most insidious effects is how it damages your relationships. It robs you of the opportunity to feel joy for other people, including friends and family members. Birthday parties, graduations, holiday gatherings—all become exercises in endurance rather than celebration.

Jealousy prevents us from exchanging places with others, from experiencing true empathy. It isolates us and fosters selfishness, building walls between us and the people we care about. I noticed how I'd become quieter at family gatherings, how I'd withdraw from conversations about children and milestones.

The corrosion of relationships happens gradually. You can't feel good about your friends' and family's good fortune. You tear down good people in your mind. Sometimes—and this is the ugliest part—people caught in jealousy's grip work to harm others and remove their sources of happiness. It becomes a source of bad thoughts and deeds and can even be the cause of physical or emotional violence.

When you succumb to jealousy, you end up with friends and acquaintances who are unhappy and generally unpleasant—more miserable, less skilled, poorer, in every way less than you are.

This happens because jealousy pushes away anyone whose qualities made you feel jealous in the first place. They wouldn't want to be around you any more than you would want to be around them. This leaves you with the worst kind of people as friends—those who tear others down to build themselves up.

I noticed this happening in my own life. I was gravitating toward other parents who complained and criticized, who focused on the negative. Our conversations often devolved into pointing out others' perceived weaknesses and foibles. It wasn't healthy, and it certainly wasn't helping me be a better parent to my son.

NON-JUDGMENT STOPS JEALOUSY

I came to understand that jealousy is rooted in comparison and expectation born of entitlement. I was jealous toward parents of typical children because I compared their circumstances to mine. Further, I felt entitled to what they had, so I was upset that I didn't get what I believed I deserved. The combination of comparison and entitlement generated jealousy within me.

The mental discipline of non-judgment reduced the cause of my jealousy. If you don't make the comparison—the judgment—jealousy doesn't have the spark that ignites its flame. Like other spiritual practices, it requires mental discipline and a recognition of jealousy's perils.

The challenge with non-judgment is that it's most effective at stopping jealousy at inception. It's also difficult for many to practice since judgments come so quickly and naturally. For me, it was almost automatic to see a child speaking in full sentences and immediately think of my son's limited verbal abilities.

Once the judgment is made and jealousy arises, non-judgment isn't the most useful technique for redirection or stopping the feelings from growing stronger. For that, I discovered a more powerful practice: rejoicing.

REJOICING OVERCOMES JEALOUSY

I knew jealousy wasn't an uplifting or productive emotion, so I needed to find a way to stop feeling it. In my younger years, I wasn't particularly prone to jealousy. During high school, I felt it occasionally, but I didn't have a family history that made jealousy a major issue (except perhaps around finances). I didn't seek out drama, and whenever I found myself feeling jealous, I usually just removed myself from the circumstances that caused it.

Based on what I saw some of my friends go through with jealousy, I always thought that instinct served me well. But I wasn't prepared for the causes of jealousy I faced with my special needs child. I didn't have advanced strategies for dealing with it, and avoidance was no longer a realistic option if I wanted to be involved with my family—which I did.

I came across a Buddhist teaching on rejoicing that changed everything for me. This isn't the Christian concept of worship; Buddhist rejoicing is the practice of exchanging yourself with another and feeling sympathetic joy through them. It's as simple as putting yourself in their shoes and imagining their joy. The key aspect of the practice is to employ and sustain focus on the joyous feeling whenever jealousy arises. An undisciplined mind would use the sympathetic joy as a trigger for feeling more jealousy. A disciplined mind crowds out feelings of jealousy by appreciating the joy experienced by another.

SYMPATHETIC JOY

I began to practice feeling joy through the parents of other children. I feared this would increase my jealousy, but the opposite was actually the case. I would imagine myself in their place and felt the joy they felt in their children's development and accomplishments. I focused my mind on being happy for them, and through them, I found a measure of happiness for myself. The critical part was that I didn't compare their child to mine—that would have led to jealousy and despair. I had to learn to cut off those thoughts of comparison the moment they would arise.

I learned this out of necessity. Later, I found this form of mental discipline was a spiritual practice called "applying opponents" in Buddhism. Comparisons were a train of thought leading to a destination full of suffering. It was a mental discipline not to board that train, and it was indeed a discipline because my mind habitually wanted to board that train to nowhere good.

I just felt some degree of the joy they felt, and I was happy for them. Their good fortune didn't diminish me or my child—this isn't a zero-sum game. In sharing their joy, and in not comparing my child to theirs, my jealousy diminished. A friend's son made the honor roll, and instead of thinking about how my son struggled with basic academics, I focused on how proud she must feel. A neighbor's daughter performed in a dance recital, and rather than dwelling on my son's coordination difficulties, I immersed myself in their family's excitement and pride.

I found that the more I honored the good fortune and good qualities of others, the more I was elevated. The mind thinks the opposite is true—it seeks to elevate the self by bringing others down. But rejoicing elevates the self by reveling in another's goodness or good fortune. Rejoicing is a practice of a pure mind unhindered by selfish concerns. It isn't easy, and it isn't what the mind naturally wants to do, but the rewards are profound.

THE BENEFITS OF REJOICING

I began intentionally honoring and respecting the achievements of my friend's children. When I would see another's child doing something extraordinary, I made a point to compliment them. Ordinarily, this would have been a trigger for jealousy. I took it as a reminder to feel sympathetic joy for their good fortune. This practice prevented the jealousy from arising and replaced it with a warm feeling of joy.

"Your daughter's violin performance was beautiful," I'd say to a parent after a school concert, focusing on their pride rather than my own pain.

"I love watching how gentle your son is with younger children," I'd comment at a playground, genuinely appreciating that quality without the bitter aftertaste of comparison.

When I would see a family enjoying a good time with their child, I would express pleasure in that as well. This was also a trigger for jealousy that I learned to turn into its opposite. After starting to practice rejoicing, I found it attracts better friends. People naturally want to be around others who celebrate their accomplishments. People who rejoice with others are truly supportive friends who wish only the best for them. When you rejoice with others, they take pleasure in your company.

My social circle gradually shifted. I found myself connecting more with parents who could celebrate all children's successes—their own, others', and even my son's small but meaningful achievements. Our conversations became more positive, more supportive, and ultimately more healing.

REJOICING DIMINISHES FEELINGS OF LACK

I didn't set out to overcome a sense of lack—I didn't even recognize it was a problem. Lack was a consistent feature of my life that brought me down, but I assumed that was just how life was. It seemed everyone was experiencing it. It wasn't until later that I connected this feeling to the suffering described by the Buddha.

When I was focused on someone else's enjoyments, I was not thinking about my own feelings of lack and insufficiency. I realized that rejoicing comes from a mind of abundance—a belief that I will not experience lack. As my sense of lack diminished, the root cause of jealousy was weakened, and my life felt more complete and fulfilled. I still had challenges—my son's condition hadn't changed—but my relationship to those challenges transformed.

One evening, I sat with my son as he methodically lined up his toy cars. He didn't speak, but he hummed softly to himself, completely content in his activity. I watched his careful movements, the slight smile on his face when each car was perfectly positioned. In that moment, I felt no lack, no jealousy, no wish for something different. There was only love, acceptance, and a quiet joy in witnessing his happiness, exactly as he was.

The journey from jealousy to rejoicing isn't a straight line. Even now, I have moments when I see what might have been and feel that old familiar ache. But those moments no longer define me or my relationship with my son. They're just passing clouds in a sky that has become, against all odds, remarkably bright.

THE TOUGH GET GOING

EFFORT WITHOUT RESULTS

After the roller coaster of emotions—the anger, the jealousy, the sadness—I found myself standing at a crossroads. I wasn't ready to simply accept that my son would always be autistic. Not yet. Instead, I tightened my grip and started searching for a way out. A cure. A solution. Something that would make this all go away.

If you're reading this, maybe you're at this stage now. Perhaps you've acknowledged your child's condition, but deep down, you still believe there's a way to fix it. I understand that feeling completely.

THE QUEST BEGINS

When I finally accepted that my son was autistic, I immediately added a "but" to the end of that thought. Yes, he's autistic, *but* it doesn't have to be permanent. Yes, he's struggling now, *but* we can overcome this. The journey to acceptance isn't a straight line. It's full of attractive side roads and tempting detours, and honestly, exploring these paths is part of the process. Like most people, I wasn't willing to accept what I viewed as "bad" until I had exhausted every other possibility first.

What I didn't consider—what never even occurred to me in those early days—was to question whether what I thought was "bad" really was bad at all. Maybe, just maybe, my son's autism wasn't a tragedy to overcome but simply a different way of experiencing the world. Perhaps reading this book will save you years of lost time and money chasing after solutions that won't lead you where you think you want to go.

TEMPORARY, NOT PERMANENT

"My son is autistic, but it's not forever."

This became my mantra, my lifeline. It's probably the most common form of denial among parents of children with special needs—we acknowledge the diagnosis, but we reject the permanence. It's like the first rest stop on the long swim across an ocean of sadness.

What makes this stage so seductive is that for some families, it actually turns out to be true. Some children do overcome significant challenges or outgrow certain diagnoses. These success stories get passed around like precious gems, reinforcing the denial among the vast majority of us for whom that outcome isn't going to happen.

This was, for me, the most natural and longest-lasting stage of grief. I envisioned this quest for a cure as the endgame—the final chapter of our story. I saw myself as the hero, the savior who would never surrender.

"I will never give up fighting for my child."

"I will search as long as it takes to find a cure."

I truly believed that if I just persisted long enough, fought hard enough, my child would eventually be "normal." There are entire support groups built around sustaining this form of denial. We tell ourselves we're being strong, being advocates. We don't realize that our resistance doesn't change reality—it just prolongs our suffering.

I even took pride in that suffering. I wore it like a badge of courage that proved my resolve and perseverance. This fed my delusions of nobility and strength. In reality, I was an ignorant fool who believed his own arrogant narrative. And none of it benefited my son.

STORIES OF HOPE AND RECOVERY

I devoured books about autism. I sought out the stories of children who had "recovered" or "overcome" autism. Most autism books fall into this category, and I read many of them. Maybe you picked up this book expecting the same thing—a roadmap to making your child "normal." These stories feel good in the moment. They keep hope alive. But they also sustain an unproductive and unhealthy denial that can keep us stuck for years.

I often wonder: Why aren't there more books that celebrate a special child's uniqueness instead of treating it as a problem to solve? These books are exceedingly rare. If they were more common, I probably wouldn't have felt the need to write this one.

The pitfalls of immersing yourself in recovery stories are many. First and most importantly, for most conditions like autism, there simply is no cure. These stories reinforce our denial and sentence us to sustained misery as we wait for a breakthrough that may never come. They can turn us into overzealous advocates who "fight like hell" on a "cure or bust" mission that ultimately exhausts everyone involved.

FINDING OTHERS LIKE US

Support groups can be incredibly helpful. They're a valuable source of information and practical advice from people who have walked in your shoes. There's real comfort in sharing experiences with others who truly understand your daily struggles in a way that friends and family simply cannot.

However, since most people in these groups are in various stages of denial themselves, much of the support is geared toward sustaining that denial rather than moving through it.

My wife and I didn't spend much time with support groups. Being introverts, we didn't crave the social contact. And being realistic (or perhaps just less optimistic than others), I grew weary of the denial that permeated these meetings and the unspoken rule that I needed to stay silent to avoid upsetting people with my growing skepticism.

CHASING THE CURE

Like most people, when I acknowledged that I had a problem, my instinct was to solve it. This is where the energy of angry determination often gets directed—into research, treatments, therapies, and potential cures.

Most parents do exactly what I did: research everything written about your child's condition. Read every article, every study, every blog post. To the degree that your actions actually help your child, they're good and necessary. But to the degree that they support your denial, they're counterproductive. The tricky part is figuring out which is which.

I wasn't just interested in treatment; I wanted a cure. I wasn't interested in being realistic with my expectations. I chased unicorns, and I felt seduced by treatments that promised the moon and delivered nothing. Fortunately, I didn't allow my wishful thinking to waste too much money on worthless interventions—though I came dangerously close more than once.

MY BROKEN CHILD

During this phase, I saw my son as broken. I believed something was wrong—terribly, fundamentally wrong—and it needed to be fixed. I asked therapists and doctors to help him "catch up" to his peers. I was crushed by

evaluations that placed him in the 0.01 percentile. I'd stare at those numbers and think, "This is not what I wanted. This is not the life I planned."

Most people believe the journey to acceptance ends here, at this depressing dead end of realizing there might not be a cure. What I didn't see then was that there was a silver lining waiting just beyond this difficult realization.

Anger as Fuel

Back then, I believed that anger served a useful purpose. The fire of anger, I thought, could drive a powerful engine of determination. It's a compelling narrative, and it carries a kernel of truth. However, I've learned through hard experience that sustained anger is incredibly harmful. Any benefit you might get from keeping it alive simply isn't worth the price you pay. Determination sustained by anger is really just another form of denial. While it might temporarily comfort you, it's emotionally disturbing and draining over time, and it was harmful to my physical and mental health.

I channeled my anger into a determination to find the best possible treatment for my son—a cure, if one existed. I felt noble in my quest. I was Perceval searching for the Holy Grail, that legendary cup with healing powers. Unfortunately, Perceval was a fool, and so was I.

I had formed some hidden beliefs that served to sustain my anger and hinder my personal growth for many years:

First, I believed my child was broken and needed to be fixed. This implied he wasn't acceptable just as he was. He needed to change to be worthy of love and acceptance.

Second, I believed I had the power, the intellect, and the drive to find a treatment that would make him better. This was a complete delusion based on ego, pride, and wishful thinking. Deep down, I knew there was no cure, but I searched anyway. I was hunting unicorns, searching for the Holy Grail—pick your metaphor.

Third, I believed this was not what I wanted, and I would never be happy as long as my son was autistic. This was perhaps the most debilitating delusion of all. It was rooted in my dreams of a perfect family life—dreams that included an implicit belief that I deserved that life, and only that life would be acceptable. It was a deep sense of entitlement, the opposite of thankfulness, and the destroyer of gratitude. It prevented me from appreciating my son's unique personality, his sense of humor, his deep love for me, or any of the good he brought to my life.

These beliefs and other similar false ideas became the bars on the cage I built in my mind—a cage I struggled to escape for the better part of 15 years.

The Danger of "Doing Your Research"

When I tell people I "did my research" on autism, what I really mean is I found trusted resources and accepted them uncritically—especially when they said what I wanted to hear. People (including me) accept nonsense they want to believe as truth.

We often don't understand the science and prefer compelling anecdotes to dry statistics. We get bogged down in medical jargon and come away thinking we know more than we actually do.

Understanding scientific efficacy is hard. Most of us become concerned our child may be autistic when they show developmental delays. Once this delay is documented, there are three possible outcomes:

- The child improves and catches up to peers
- The child remains delayed and has lifelong limitations
- The child improves in some areas or for some time, but eventually development stops progressing or worsens

Each potential outcome has a certain percentage of children associated with it. A treatment is only considered effective if more children show better outcomes than those receiving no treatment at all. So far, almost no treatment for autism has shown any real efficacy at all.

The biggest problem is confusing correlation with causation. Some children with developmental delays spontaneously improve. Some spontaneously get worse. The cause of these changes is completely unknown. However, if the change happens to coincide with some specific treatment, people naturally assume the treatment caused the change.

Take vaccines, for example. Many autistic children suddenly deteriorate at 18-24 months. This deterioration roughly corresponds to when vaccines are administered, so vaccines get blamed as the cause. But no statistical connection with vaccines has ever been established. Many autistic children deteriorated at the same age whether or not they had vaccines.

People used to blame the mercury in vaccines. But after mercury was removed from vaccines in 2004, rates of autism didn't change at all. Yet people still consider this a cause.

The same problem happens with most unproven treatments. Some children suddenly start improving. Parents who were attempting some questionable treatment at the time assume the treatment was responsible. The stories of miraculous responses spread on social media. People mistake these anecdotes for real statistical evidence. Money gets wasted, and disappointment inevitably follows.

SNAKE OIL AND THE COST OF HOPE

When a condition has no known cure, snake oil treatments multiply like weeds. They exploit a very real fear—the fear that a viable treatment might be overlooked. No parent wants to live with the guilt of not trying everything possible to help their child.

You've probably heard of the "Lorenzo's Oil" syndrome, named after the movie where parents discover a treatment for their son's rare disease when doctors couldn't. This story, while inspiring, has convinced many parents that they must try anything and everything, no matter the cost. This is exactly how snake oil peddlers rip off good families who are already struggling.

"Every child is unique" doesn't mean there's a special cure out there just for your child. The rates at which children improve with these unproven treatments is exactly the same as with no treatment at all.

Some of these questionable cures are actually dangerous and should be avoided at all costs. When my son was very young, much of the hope for improvement centered on diet and nutrition.

Mineral chelation—the removal of heavy metals from the tissues—was touted as a cure for autism. This was a compelling narrative since lead poisoning shows many symptoms similar to autism. This belief also contributed to the false hysteria over mercury in vaccines.

In practice, many autistic children got sick from chelation therapies. The first rule of any treatment should be "do no harm," and this therapy fails that test.

Even more dangerous was a trend in the late 2010s when a delusional minister promoted the idea that ingesting bleach could have a positive effect on autism. After a few children got sick, some parents were arrested, and the practice largely stopped.

In some fundamentalist religious communities, "demon exorcism" was attempted on autistic children. They started with the belief that autism was caused by demons and if these demons could be cast out, the autism would go away. No child who underwent this procedure ever showed any sign of improvement. Tragically, a few children were killed through excessive force intended to exorcise the demons, and authorities finally cracked down on the practice.

As long as there are desperate parents, there will be snake oil treatments. And as long as there are snake oil treatments, some will inevitably prove harmful. You don't want to be the parent who hurts their helpless child with an unproven treatment.

COMFORT VERSUS CURE

Many of these unproven treatments do provide comfort and enjoyment for children with special needs. I'm not suggesting you avoid enjoyable treatments and therapies. I'm simply suggesting you manage your expectations. For many conditions, there is no cure. And you, as a loving parent with no medical training, will not discover one on your own.

My son enjoyed many comfortable treatments over the years. We lived near a prominent equestrian therapy center for a while, and he went on a few occasions. It was a pleasant experience for him. It did nothing to cure his autism.

We once took a trip to Hawaii and stayed at a resort where my son experienced dolphins up close. They swam with him, and he touched them and fed them fish. He had a great time. It did nothing to cure his autism.

I've had professional masseurs come to our house to give my son a massage. He enjoyed the experience. It did nothing for his autism.

My son loves music. I listen to music with him several times per week, whenever we drive somewhere. He enjoys it immensely. It doesn't change his condition.

And here's the thing I eventually learned: that's okay. It's more than okay. These experiences weren't failures because they didn't cure him. They were successes because they brought him joy. And bringing joy to your child's life—whatever form that child takes—is what parenting is really all about.

TREATMENTS AND SNAKE OIL

STEALING FROM DESPERATE PARENTS

When I first set out to find possible treatments for my son, I felt like I'd stumbled into a carnival midway. There were so many options—ranging from the somewhat helpful to the plausibly effective, and then spiraling all the way down to the completely looney. I remember sitting at my kitchen table late at night, scrolling through websites, joining parent forums, and desperately trying to separate fact from fiction.

What struck me was that with the exception of ABA therapy, none of these treatments had any proven track record of effectiveness. Not one. Yet there I was, reading testimonial after testimonial from parents who swore that this supplement or that therapy had "cured" their child.

The internet is a wilderness of misinformation, much of it terribly plausible, teeming with snake oil products designed to drain your bank account while feeding your desperate hope. I found myself drawn to the ones that sounded most convincing—the websites with scientific-looking graphs, testimonials from "experts," and promises of breakthrough results. These often turned out to be the least effective treatments, and in some cases, like mineral chelation therapy, demonstrably dangerous.

Delving into this issue gave me a deep appreciation for how badly we humans fare when doing our own research. Most of us—myself included—will believe almost anything if we want to believe it badly enough. It seems like we think truth can somehow be generated by desire alone or the repetition of nonsense. I've seen this same pattern play out in religion, politics, and especially in experimental medical treatments. We readily accept nonsense as fact if it confirms a belief we're already clinging to.

Very few of us truly understand scientific methods or what separates a valid study from misinformation or meaningless anecdotes. Most snake oil pitches tout their "scientific validity" while offering zero actual studies or evidence beyond dubious testimonials. I was shocked by how easily I found myself nodding along with unsubstantiated claims from people I didn't know, claims that were often completely fraudulent.

People who are desperate for a cure—parents like you and me—will try anything and pay anything if we believe there's even the smallest chance for improvement. This desperation is the root of all snake oil scams. Our need for a cure provides the pre-existing bias that makes us want to believe nonsense because sometimes, a nonsensical hope feels better than no hope at all.

The most difficult problem with resisting snake oil isn't skepticism—it's the nagging fear and guilt that you might miss an actual cure. I worried constantly that if I didn't try every treatment out there, I might miss the one thing that could have made all the difference for my son.

This fear of missing out is powerful. We have a friend who purchased her own hyperbaric oxygen chamber, spending tens of thousands of dollars on what most experts consider ineffective for autism. People only spend that kind of money because they're terrified of regret—of looking back and wondering "what if we had tried?" That's why snake oil salespeople continue to fleece innocent families out of huge sums every day.

THE LURE OF MEDICATIONS

Let me be clear about something important: there is no medical treatment that effectively counteracts the mental characteristics of autism. None. And yet our culture is deeply biased toward pharmaceutical solutions for almost any health problem.

Most of us believe that if we have an ailment, all we need is the right pill to eliminate or control it. There's a widespread belief that medicines can cure almost anything, including conditions like autism, which actually can't be "cured" with medicine. Given this bias toward pharmaceutical fixes, it shouldn't be surprising that nearly every special needs child I've encountered is on some combination of medications.

Experimenting with different medications until you find the "right one" is a fool's errand with autism. I know a family with a son who has schizophrenia. The father told me the key to living with schizophrenia is finding the right medication. Not being an expert in that condition, I take his word for it. Pharmaceutical interventions absolutely have their place—but that place is not in treating the core features of autism.

I know one family that has taken their child to doctors hundreds of times over the years. They go with complaints about some ailment until they find a doctor who identifies something—anything—and offers them a prescription. Then they feel relieved that they've found the "right" treatment, and add this new drug to the list of medications their child is already taking. Then they go through this same process to find drugs for the side effects too.

Taking more than five drugs at a time is called polypharmacy, and it's considered medically dangerous. At any given time, this child may be on a dozen or more medications—all considered necessary and backed up by many doctor's appointments and tests. The parents consider each one medically necessary, and the list only grows longer. If any condition stops showing symptoms, they attribute that to the drugs and feel the need to continue them to prevent recurrence, ensuring lifelong medication.

Now, I'm not saying medications are never appropriate. Some autistic behaviors do require medical intervention. But the treatment isn't for autism itself—it's for a specific behavioral problem related to autism. I know one family whose autistic son is extremely compulsive and an "eloper" (meaning he tends to run away). Without medications, this young man is a genuine danger to himself and others. In those circumstances, medications that help with impulse control are necessary and appropriate.

Some children have a high risk of seizures, which is another circumstance where medication may be absolutely necessary. Where the health risk necessitates a medication, parents will and should do what's right for their child. However, determining what's medically necessary versus what's medically convenient is open to different interpretations.

In my experience, most autistic children don't need medications of any kind. Some parents—and I say this with empathy, not judgment—like the simplicity of sedating their child. When the child is drugged out, their behavior is more easily manageable, or they require no management at all. This might be convenient for the parents, but it does nothing for the child. I don't believe this is a justifiable circumstance for providing drugs to children on an ongoing basis.

My son has never been on any medication other than antibiotics or other prescriptions for temporary conditions. We've been fortunate that he doesn't have any condition that would require ongoing medication. He will probably never be on a regularly prescribed medication, and we've even written these instructions into his trust.

All drugs have side effects—that's just reality. The families I've known who place their children on regular medications are usually managing some kind of drug cocktail with numerous pills. One pill for the primary condition, and the others for the side effects of the first pill. This is the typical path to polypharmacy and lifelong drug dependence.

A close friend of mine from high school is a pharmacist, and so is his wife (they met in pharmacy school). They don't take any drugs other than the occasional ibuprofen. In fact, none of the pharmacists I know take medications regularly. The reason most offer is that they believe most medications are too powerful, and they would rather their body regulate itself, which it will if not constantly dosed with some medication.

TRANSCRANIAL MAGNETIC STIMULATION

My journey with transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) is how I came to fully understand snake oil. A friend of my wife worked for a prominent doctor who specialized in this treatment. The first time we went to his office, we bumped into a famous retired astronaut who was seeking treatment for depression. I immediately felt a shot of validation—if an astronaut was here, surely this must be legitimate, right?

We felt this doctor (who wasn't actually a physician) had credibility due to his years of supposed research in the field. We were offered a free treatment since my wife's friend worked with him. He ran his tests and showed us these impressive-looking images of activity in my son's brain, pointing out areas of "abnormal function" with authoritative confidence.

He interpreted these images and gave us the impression this treatment would work wonders for our son. He asked us to get up with our son and spend 30 minutes each morning looking at the rising sun before our next test a week later. Even then, I should have recognized the red flag—since this "sun therapy" was a new treatment element, there would be no way of knowing if any perceived improvement came from the magnets or from additional attention and morning sunshine.

We went back for a second test. He showed us more brain images, enthusiastically touting the differences between the first and second scans. He asked if my son had improved since the first treatment. I told him that my son seemed a bit happier and calmer, and he nodded knowingly, saying that was "a good sign." We were then escorted into another room where we received the sales pitch options for ongoing treatment.

During that pitch, I felt all the emotional tugs that fuel snake oil sales. Perhaps this treatment really would work? My son did seem different. And most powerfully—would I really want to pass on what might be the treatment that could change his life?

When I got home, I started thinking more critically about how the sales pitch worked, and I did some additional research. What struck me as odd at first was how the entire experience resembled a timeshare or used car pitch. We were shown the product by a supposed expert, escorted to a different room to discuss the "package options," and there was a clear expectation that we would sign up right there.

When I thought about the doctor's interpretation of my son's brain scans, it occurred to me that the colorful images could mean anything, or nothing at all. I wasn't offered the scans to take for a second opinion. I was completely relying on this one person's expertise and interpretations of colors on a computer screen. He could have told me the moon was made of cheese, and I wouldn't have had any way to verify or disprove it.

As I researched further, I found others offering this service, and most of the websites made fantastical claims. Some touted their "exclusive treatment on the cutting edge of scientific inquiry"—a big red flag completely contrary to how science actually works. Real scientific breakthroughs don't happen in isolation; they're verified through replication and peer review. I read criticisms from legitimate scientists who confirmed what I was beginning to suspect—it was harmless but ineffective snake oil.

In the end, I decided to forgo the treatment that would have cost more than my car. Not because it was expensive, but because it was snake oil.

Brainwave Entrainment in His Crib

I have a confession to make. Before I was married, I put a lot of time and effort into studying meditation, sleep patterns, dream interpretation, and brainwave entrainment. I even developed custom brainwave entrainment mixes with different frequencies matching various brainwave patterns based on a typical 2-hour sleep cycle. I would record my dreams by keeping a tape recorder by my bed, and I would spend time analyzing them in the morning.

It was fun and interesting—it stimulated lots of memorable dreams, and it did improve my sleep. But it didn't lead to enlightenment or liberation or any significant spiritual growth or emotional changes, so I eventually lost interest.

However, I did remember how it worked, and I knew it was effective at changing moods and stimulating brain activity. Most importantly, it was totally harmless. I reasoned that if autism was caused by scrambled and uncoordinated brain activity, perhaps synchronizing those patterns with brainwave entrainment might lead to some kind of breakthrough.

It's exactly the kind of plausible-sounding pseudoscience that permeates websites peddling snake oil cures for autism. But since it was harmless, I thought I would give it a try. I set up my son's crib with speakers on each side to create the stereo speaker environment needed for the brainwave entrainment effect without headphones. When he would nap, I would play my old brainwave entrainment mixes or just play alpha wave entrainment music.

My son responded the same way I did—he slept better on occasion and he awoke more rested. But there were also times when he clearly didn't want to experience that brainwave state. He would resist it, and on those days he was actually less restful. It did absolutely nothing to rewire his brain or alleviate the symptoms of his autism.

Everyone holds out hope that their half-baked idea will be the next Lorenzo's Oil—the miracle cure discovered by persistent parents that the medical establishment missed. It was worth a try. I knew it would do no harm. But like all snake oil treatments, it did not work.

We dabbled in music therapy for a while too. Mostly we ended up listening to a lot of classical music, which I enjoyed probably more than my son did. For a couple of years, he became absolutely obsessed with Coldplay—he would listen to the same songs on repeat for hours. He still enjoys music, and he is still autistic. The music didn't "cure" anything, but it brought him joy, and that counts for something.

EATING THERAPY

Autistic children often develop strong aversions to loud noises, certain textures, or any variety of sensations. It's quite common for them to develop aversions to certain foods, which can lead to extreme limitations on diet. My son self-limited his food to KFC chicken nuggets and cantaloupe. That's it—he literally only ate those two foods, and he would go without eating rather than consume anything else.

While we were considering our options, one of the students in my son's class had a feeding tube that protruded from his skin near his stomach. The tube had a cap that could be opened so that liquid nourishment could be injected directly into his stomach. We observed with this child just how far autistic children would go in their self-limiting behavior. The idea that "if they get hungry enough, they'll eat anything" simply isn't correct for many autistic children. When my son was down to only two foods, we felt we needed to act.

We sent him to a feeding specialist. It sounds doctorly and medical, but it wasn't—she was just a therapist who was willing to force autistic children to eat. She would make them keep food in their mouths and not spit it out, no matter how long it took for them to eat it. She was undeterred by tears, tantrums, or even vomit. When weighed against the possibility of a lifelong feeding tube, we opted for this torturous treatment. She was successful in getting my son past his aversions to other foods.

I still have mixed feelings about our decision. The fear of the lifelong feeding tube was real—we knew personally a child with a feeding tube that was going on five years. Knowing this was a choice my autistic child was making and not a medical necessity, we decided we weren't going to give him the freedom to make that choice.

However, we weren't at our last resort. He wasn't starving—he was still eating two foods. He might have gotten better on his own. The treatment we put him through was considered the last resort before a feeding tube, and I'm not sure we were really there yet.

The treatment was traumatic. Imagine being forced to eat a food you hate. You can't spit it out. And no matter how unpleasant you find it, you must eat it. I wouldn't want to go through that. But then again, I wouldn't want a feeding tube either.

I'm not certain we did the right thing. He eats a wide variety of food now. If anything, he has the more common problem of weight control. He no longer has issues with eating—other than perhaps he likes it too much. Does that end justify the means? If you're faced with that choice, you'll need to answer it for yourself and your child. There isn't a clear choice that's 100% correct, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something or riding the high horse of ignorant righteousness.

ABA THERAPY

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a type of therapy that focuses on improving specific behaviors, such as social skills, communication, reading, and academics, as well as adaptive learning skills like fine motor dexterity, hygiene, grooming, domestic capabilities, punctuality, and job competence.

When we learned my son was autistic, the only treatment with any scientific validity was ABA therapy. It was prominently featured in the book "Let Me Hear Your Voice," which is often one of the first books parents find on the subject. It provides hope—mostly false hope—to many parents, and the book remains popular today.

But it also contributes to the false idea that autism means "broken," which is why I don't recommend it to people. It's helpful for those struggling with despair or those who need denial as a temporary coping mechanism, but I found other resources more valuable for our long-term journey.

ABA was useful for my son. He acquired some life skills that serve him well today. He benefited greatly from the close attention of caring people. But it didn't really do anything to "cure" his autism because autism isn't something to be cured. ABA is a coping strategy, not a treatment in the traditional sense. It's not perfect, but it's better than all the other options available.

ABA does have limitations. It focuses on rote learning, which many autistic children excel at but which doesn't always translate to real understanding. Children often struggle to generalize what they learn in therapy to other situations. In some ways, it's akin to pet training—children learn to respond to specific cues without necessarily understanding why they're doing it.

Despite these limitations, ABA will likely be a big part of any service program offered by schools or state agencies. There are newer, more child-centered approaches emerging all the time, so if you're considering this path, I'd encourage you to buy a current book on the subject rather than relying on older resources that may not reflect the latest thinking.

In the end, what helped my son most wasn't any particular therapy or treatment—it was being surrounded by people who accepted him exactly as he was, who worked with his strengths rather than constantly trying to "fix" his weaknesses. Sometimes the best medicine isn't medicine at all—it's love, patience, and the willingness to see your child for who they are, not who you once thought they would be.

A BROKEN HALLELUJAH

THE SOCIAL CHALLENGE BEGINS

The social challenges of raising a child with special needs run deep, far deeper than most people realize until they're living it themselves. They ripple through every aspect of your life in ways both expected and surprising.

My wife and I are both introverts by nature. We've never had a large circle of friends or a particularly vibrant social life, even before our son came along.

Our comfort zone has always been spending time with family and a few close friends who feel like family. This worked well for us—it's who we are at our core. But when you add a child with special needs to the equation, your already small social circle can shrink even further.

SCHOOL DAYS AND SEGREGATION

When my son started school, he was placed in segregated classes with other children with special needs. This single decision shaped our social landscape in profound ways. Our school-related social connections became almost exclusively with other parents who had children with special needs. That's how I met and got to know a number of families walking similar paths.

My wife often lamented that our circle was so limited. We couldn't just naturally join in with the much larger community of parents who had typical children. We weren't going to meet those parents through classroom acquaintances because we wouldn't be attending their birthday parties or cheering from the sidelines at typical sporting events. We were fortunate to live in a large metropolitan area where programs for children with special needs could flourish. The special needs baseball league became a bright spot for us. There, we met many wonderful families who understood our daily reality without explanation.

THE PAINFUL TRUTH ABOUT SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

One of the first things that stands out when you're raising a child with special needs is that many parents of typical children want nothing to do with you. I understand the reasons—special needs children often struggle with socialization, and parents of typical children simply don't know how to deal with the differences. But understanding doesn't make it any less painful.

All those parents I thought I would make friends with? It didn't happen. The playground chats never evolved into coffee dates or family dinners. The invitations never came.

What's even sadder is that this kind of discrimination happens within the special needs community itself. Parents of children with milder challenges sometimes avoid families with more severely affected children. They worry their children might pick up "bad habits" or behaviors. They desperately want their children to spend time with typical peers where they believe proper socialization happens.

The result? Parents of children with the most severe challenges end up being the most socially isolated of all. This breaks my heart. I feel deep compassion for their situation, but there isn't much I can do to change it. The social dynamics are as real as they are painful.

THE INCLUSION DEBATE

There's an ongoing debate in special education about inclusion in regular classrooms. One of the main arguments for inclusion is that it allows children with special needs to learn proper socialization skills from their typical peers. The problem? It usually doesn't work the way people hope it will.

I remember our friends who sued the school system to provide an inclusive classroom experience for their son. The school complied, providing a dedicated aide and full inclusion in a regular classroom. If your family has the resources to lawyer up and fight the schools, you can win some pyrrhic victories. It's expensive, but in some districts, it might be a necessary step.

The outcome for this child, however, was a disaster. He needed more attention than even a devoted aide could provide. He couldn't focus on instruction without disrupting the class. He was visibly unhappy with the situation and the rules being imposed on him. And since he was the only one with an aide, he became painfully aware of his differences. After several difficult weeks, our friends asked the school to return him to a special class.

For students with more significant challenges, specialized classes are generally better suited to their needs. Our school system used a hybrid approach—they would place our son in classes with typical children when he could handle it, but provided a more structured environment when he needed it. This middle path is usually better for those who need more support.

Many parents imagine that inclusive learning will somehow "cure" their child. It's a solution born more from denial than from an objective evaluation of what's best for the child. They believe their special child will observe typical children and somehow absorb their behavior patterns. They believe their child will be welcomed as part of the social group and become an integral part of classroom activities. In short, they believe inclusive learning will solve all their problems.

Since those outcomes rarely materialize, it shouldn't be surprising when inclusive settings don't turn out well for many children with significant needs.

FRIENDSHIP AND CONNECTION

My son has no friends—not in the conventional sense. He maintains no relationships outside our family. He can't carry on a conversation like a typical adult. On a good day, he might manage a brief three or four-turn exchange with a kind and understanding stranger.

He has no concept of social cues, body language, or the countless subtle ways people communicate with each other. He shows no interest in playing with friends, hanging out, or spending time with peers. He enjoys video games, but mostly the solitary ones where interaction isn't required.

In many ways, I've become my son's best friend. I end up providing the social experiences he would ordinarily have with others his age. I take him everywhere I go, and he participates in nearly everything I do. I listen to every word he says, even when he's spouting complete nonsense or repeating scripts from movies or YouTube videos.

This has become one of my spiritual practices, actually. When my son recites a script—something he does frequently—I have choices in how I respond. I could feel bored with the lack of meaningful content. I could feel sad that his mind seems to lack original thoughts. I could travel down those rabbit holes of despair over and over again.

Instead, whenever I hear him speak, I feel thankful. There was a time when we didn't know if he would ever talk at all. We know other families whose children are completely non-verbal. That perspective helps me find gratitude in the midst of repetition.

My son has no shortage of social interaction with me and his family. He's surrounded by people who love him deeply. And after we die, he will have caring people in his life. But he will never have long-term friendships, romantic partners, or people in his life who aren't either family or paid caregivers.

That's the reality of who he is, and accepting this truth has been part of our journey.

SPECIAL VERSUS HIGH-FUNCTIONING

My son is special in ways that are immediately apparent to anyone who meets him. Due to his limited language and social skills, it takes just one interaction for people to recognize his challenges.

When we moved from one county to another within our state, we needed to be interviewed to verify his eligibility for ongoing services. The examiners are trained to look for fraud—people who might exaggerate disabilities to gain government assistance. When the worker interviewed my son at our home and asked about his care in our new place, my son replied in his typical rapid-fire manner:

"Googleplex, googleplex black, white, new earth, Hubble telescope 4.5 billion years old, sun biting earth, red and blue make purple, save it until 2080, yes!"

The enthusiastic "yes!" at the end came with his characteristic gusto. Our services transfer was approved without delay.

Being visibly "special" means people generally give him the benefit of accommodating his limitations. Nobody mistakes him for a typical adult capable of independence. This places lower expectations on him and makes people more likely to forgive him when he fails to conform to social norms. Realistically, this has made both his life and ours much easier.

From what I've observed, higher-functioning individuals on the spectrum face greater challenges in many ways. They need to interact in a typical world but lack the full set of skills to do so effectively. They often have stronger desires for family and friendships but face significant difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. Higher-functioning adults typically qualify for fewer services and supports. Many are expected to hold down jobs, but they often lack the skills to sustain themselves in competitive employment.

They're more vulnerable to scams and predatory lending. They frequently end up in difficult circumstances—substandard housing, poor healthcare, limited resources—sometimes at the mercy of those who would exploit them. Our capitalist system, designed in part to force capable people to work, ends up subjecting those with invisible special needs to tremendous hardships.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WORLD

Over the years, we've had our share of challenging incidents with strangers. When my son was seven, we attended a family reunion. Many out-of-town visitors, including our family, stayed at the same hotel. On Saturday morning, about twenty of us gathered for the continental breakfast. The only other people in the room were two older German tourists.

My son was going from one family member to another, giving hugs. He wasn't used to being around so many relatives at once and was making the most of it. Having only seen many of these relatives once or twice before, he wasn't entirely clear on who was family and who wasn't.

As he made his rounds, he stopped and hugged the arm of one of the German women. She was annoyed, and I apologized, explaining that he didn't realize she wasn't family since everyone else in the room was related to us. A few minutes later, he did it again, and she became furious. She launched into a lecture about how we should control our unruly child.

She was right in one sense—we hadn't stopped him from hugging her arm twice. But was her angry lecture really necessary? Was a child's hug so offensive that she needed to express near rage? Could she not see that he was different and meant no harm?

Were we leaning too heavily on the "he's special" defense when we should have been more careful? Perhaps. If we had realized how upset she would become, we certainly would have kept him as far from her as possible. But it was hard for us to imagine that a loving child giving hugs could provoke such anger.

I tried to feel compassion for her, imagining she must not be accustomed to expressions of love and reacted out of discomfort. The incident ruined the day for my wife, who was convinced the woman was just a mean-spirited old battle-ax with no redeeming qualities. I found it difficult to convince her otherwise. If I'm honest, at the time, I probably agreed with my wife, so any counsel would have been half-hearted.

Letting Go of Independence

There was another incident that marked the end of my illusions about my son's potential independence. I used to allow him to go on a specific theme park ride by himself. He could wait in line, hold his place, and follow basic staff instructions. A well-supervised theme park seemed like a safe place to give him a taste of freedom.

Unfortunately, something happened while he was in line. Since I wasn't there to witness it and since his answers to questions aren't reliable, he couldn't defend himself against whatever accusations arose. That's when the harsh reality hit me—he could never be left alone and unsupervised. He was simply too vulnerable.

I denied this truth to myself for a long time. I wanted desperately to believe he could have some measure of independence. I think every parent wants to believe their child will grow into an autonomous adult. My attachment to this hope fed my denial, and my denial caused me to make a poor decision that put my son in circumstances he couldn't handle on his own. It was a painful lesson.

Reaching Out His Way

Despite his limited success, my son still yearns to connect with people, even if only for a brief moment. When we're out in public, he often says hello to random strangers while vigorously waving his hands. His hello/goodbye wave isn't as polished as the British queen's, but what he lacks in technique, he makes up for in enthusiasm.

I try to guide him to wait until someone is making eye contact and smiling—he certainly gets more positive responses when he does that. But he still often blurts out "hi" to people who aren't paying attention to him, catching them completely off guard. Although he's an introvert like his parents, his exuberant side emerges when he's in a particularly good mood and we're out in public.

ACCEPT US OR GO AWAY

If you're more extroverted than we are, this chapter might have been especially difficult for you to read. There are undeniable social limitations when you have a child with special needs. We follow a simple rule that has saved us time and effort on false friendships: we socialize as a family most of the time.

If my son isn't welcome at a family event, we don't want to be there either. My wife and I refuse to attend gatherings with other children without bringing our own. And because we mostly connected with parents who also had children with special needs, this approach generally worked well for us.

In those instances where we declined invitations, I never felt remorse or wondered if we'd missed making lifelong friends. How could I possibly sustain a friendship with someone who couldn't accept my son? While this practice may have limited our social circle, I believe it limited it for the better.

Our approach might seem isolating to some, but for us, it created a boundary of respect—both for our son and for ourselves. Accept us as we are, or we'll go our separate ways. There's a quiet dignity in that choice, a broken hallelujah that honors the reality of our lives without apology.

RULE THE WORLD

MANAGING YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOR

When you're raising a child with special needs, learning to manage their behavior effectively becomes one of your most critical skills. Some days it feels like you're navigating a maze in the dark, while other days you might feel like you've finally cracked the code. I've been there too, stumbling through those early years, sometimes getting it right and often getting it wrong.

THE PRICELESS GIFT OF EXPERT ADVICE

The most important parenting lessons came to us through the early ABA therapists who worked with our son. We were incredibly fortunate to have these experts in our corner. Their guidance did more than just help our son—it saved my marriage too.

My wife and I found ourselves locked in a silent tug-of-war over how to parent our son. She thought I pushed him too hard, demanding he learn skills that might have been beyond his reach. I believed she coddled him, doing everything for him and stunting his potential growth. We'd exchange loaded glances across the dinner table when one of us helped him cut his food or made him try to do it himself.

"He needs to learn independence," I'd insist in our late-night discussions.

"He needs support and understanding," she'd counter, tears threatening at the corners of her eyes.

Without those third-party experts to provide guidance and perspective, I'm certain my wife and I would have fought more, struggled more with our son, and he would have suffered because of our inability to find common ground. The experts helped us understand that we were both right—and both wrong—in different ways.

The balancing act between encouraging independence and providing necessary support is part of every parent's journey, but these issues become magnified when special needs enter the picture. It's infinitely more difficult to determine what your child is truly capable of when developmental challenges create an uneven landscape of abilities.

After years of trial and error, countless therapy sessions, and more than a few tears, we discovered that managing our son's behavior could be distilled down to a handful of simple yet powerful principles. These aren't complicated psychological theories—they're practical tools that helped us create structure and consistency in a world that often felt chaotic.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The military has a sequence they call "rules of engagement"—a framework that governs how and when to respond to various situations. As parents, we develop our own rules of engagement too, though we rarely recognize them as such.

With special needs children, these rules need to be crystal clear and applied consistently by everyone involved in their care. I noticed early on that my son thrived on routine and clear expectations. Unlike some typical children who delight in testing boundaries and finding loopholes, most special needs children tend to be rule followers. They usually don't have the inclination or understanding needed to be clever or push boundaries in the same way.

My son found comfort in knowing exactly what was expected of him. Once he understood a rule, he followed it with dedication, almost relief. It was as if the world made a little more sense when he knew where the lines were drawn.

THE CURRENT CURRENCY

One of the most effective tools in our parenting toolkit became what we called "current currency"—whatever our son wanted most at any given time. This could change from week to week or even day to day, but recognizing and using it thoughtfully transformed our ability to shape his behavior.

The current currency could be anything from preferred foods to favorite toys, special activities, or even the promise of future events. Every child has their preferences, and they're all different. What worked as motivation for my son might be completely ineffective for another child. There are some important boundaries to establish, though. Necessities are never currency. We never withheld food or water or failed to keep him clean, comfortable, and safe. You might think this should go without saying, but in moments of frustration, even good parents can sometimes make threats they shouldn't.

I should mention the complicated role of food as reinforcement. It's the most common and relevant motivator for many children, and it's nearly impossible not to use it to some degree. My son is highly motivated to work for treats, usually small things with minimal calories. We use them because they're effective, but we're always mindful of the potential problems this approach could create with eating habits and weight management.

What surprised me was discovering that my son could think about the future in ways I hadn't expected. He could delay gratification, conserve resources, and work toward major future events that mattered to him. Once we recognized this ability, we could use future rewards as effective motivators.

We used his current currency in three main ways:

- To reinforce good behavior by providing what he desired
- To encourage compliance by explaining what he might lose
- To address willful disobedience by temporarily withholding privileges

The key was learning to distinguish between a mistake and a bad choice. The outward behavior might look the same, but the inward motivation makes all the difference in the world.

My son makes plenty of mistakes due to his cognitive challenges. He often worries he's been a "bad boy" when he simply makes an honest mistake, which becomes a source of anxiety for him. He identifies strongly with being a "good boy," and this personal identity is important to him. We never punish him for mistakes committed out of ignorance or forgetfulness, even if we've explained the rule before. His memory works differently, and reminders are often needed. He's only disciplined for bad choices—when he knows better but chooses to do something wrong anyway.

With special needs children, it's usually easier to tell the difference between mistakes and willful disobedience than with typical children. My son is a terrible liar with obvious tells—his face gives him away immediately. It would be nearly impossible for him to convince us that a willfully chosen behavior was just an innocent mistake.

Punishing mistakes only frustrates a child who doesn't understand what they did wrong. That doesn't motivate better choices—it simply creates confusion and anxiety. The ability to distinguish between an honest mistake and willful disobedience is absolutely crucial when parenting a child with special needs.

Reinforce, Ignore, or Crack Down

For anything your child does that matters to you, there are really only three possible responses: reinforce, ignore, or crack down. Choosing wisely among these options makes all the difference.

Any behavior that ends with your child finding pleasure or getting what they want will be repeated. This reinforcement can take many forms—it might be their current currency, a smile, a laugh, or anything else that brings them joy. Even negative attention can be reinforcing if attention is what they crave.

Be extremely careful about what you reinforce. Don't reward behaviors you don't want to see more of. This seems obvious, but it's surprisingly easy to accidentally reinforce problematic behaviors.

I remember spending a day with another family who was having trouble with their special needs son, about eight years old at the time. I watched this child ask repeatedly for things, dozens upon dozens of times. The parents would say no, but they wouldn't take steps to stop the asking. When he escalated to screaming and making outbursts, they eventually caved and gave him what he wanted.

Watching them give in after a dozen "no's" and a tantrum, it was painfully clear why they had ongoing problems. They had unintentionally taught their son exactly what was required to get to "yes," and he was simply following the script they had created.

My wife and I joke about "not giving in to terrorist demands"—a crude but effective way to remind ourselves not to reward problematic behavior. This approach has always been easier for me to maintain, much harder for his mother.

The pull to make your child happy in the moment is incredibly strong, especially when you've witnessed their struggles.

What You Ignore Fades Away

When faced with minor annoyances, ignoring is almost always the better option. There's no ill will generated by simply not reacting to behaviors that don't cause real harm. Cracking down creates tension and bad feelings, so it should be reserved for situations that truly require intervention.

Ignoring can be challenging, though. Children will often repeat behaviors or become more persistent to get a reaction. My son went through a phase of unrolling entire rolls of toilet paper just to get the cardboard tube. He would proudly bring them to show me because I made the mistake of laughing the first time he did it.

I had to completely ignore this behavior more than a dozen times before it finally stopped. He would come over and purposely place the empty toilet rolls right in my face to ensure I saw them. It wasn't worth cracking down on—it was just wasted toilet paper—but it wasn't something I wanted him to continue, especially when he started doing it at his grandparents' house.

The hardest part of ignoring is remembering that attention itself can be reinforcing, even if it's negative. When you call attention to something, you might inadvertently encourage more of that behavior. Another reason to

choose ignoring for minor issues is that it preserves your authority for the things that really matter. Cracking down on every little thing makes it harder to be effective when addressing serious problems.

When to Crack Down

"Cracking down" means making it clear that a behavior must stop entirely. The parent communicates that continuing or repeating the behavior will have negative consequences. This approach should be used sparingly to maintain its effectiveness.

When we do need to crack down, we follow our own escalating rules of engagement:

- First, we warn by threatening to withhold something desired
- We try to make the consequence fit the behavior
- If the behavior continues, we follow through by removing the current currency

There's also what I call the "authoritarian voice"—a tone reserved only for the rarest occasions. If my son is in imminent danger and I need his immediate attention, I use this firm, loud voice that stands out from my normal speaking voice. He knows to pay attention right away when he hears it. I'm not a fan of using fear to control behavior, but in potentially dangerous situations, it serves an important purpose.

The Question of Physical Intervention

I can honestly say I've never hit my son, certainly never in anger. However, there have been occasions when I've had to physically restrain him for his safety or others'.

By nature, my son isn't aggressive or prone to anger. He has never acted violently toward others simply because he didn't get his way. However, when overwhelmed with anxiety, he can sometimes lose self-control. He becomes deeply frustrated if he believes he's being punished unfairly. He strongly identifies with being a "good boy" who follows the rules. If he feels he's being falsely accused when he believes he's done everything right, his anxiety can spiral out of control.

On rare occasions, this has turned physical. He got out of control at high school once, and when my wife arrived, the school security guard was actively restraining him. On a couple of occasions, he grabbed his mother too hard in his distress, causing her pain. I had to intervene and physically restrain him—not to hurt him, but to prevent him from hurting his mother or himself. He doesn't live in fear of physical punishment, but he understands that using physical force to get what he wants is never acceptable.

The Hard Truth About Consequences

The most difficult decision I've faced with my son involves what to teach him about the potential consequences of aggression. The reality is that while he will always be welcome in our home, we simply cannot live in fear of what he might do.

If he were to become consistently aggressive or violent toward us, we wouldn't be able to keep him in our home. This is a painful but necessary truth. The dilemma is whether to explain this to him.

If I'm honest about the potential consequences, it might increase his anxiety and trigger the very behaviors I'm trying to prevent. If I don't tell him, he might do something truly harmful because he didn't understand what might happen.

After the last incident when he hurt his mother, I decided to explain the situation to him as clearly and calmly as I could. I wasn't threatening him—just helping him understand reality. He understood that living with strangers would be far less desirable than staying with his parents. He doesn't want to lose his current life circumstances.

What happened afterward gave me hope. He developed a healthy remorse for having hurt his mother. Some regrets aren't bad—being sorry and expressing remorse for harming someone is a positive feeling that helps prevent us from repeating mistakes. He deeply regrets hurting his mother and mentions it often, saying things like "good boy not hurting momma." He carries genuine remorse, and though we assure him he's forgiven, I appreciate that he remembers. That feeling of regret might be the only thing that helps him maintain control if he ever becomes overwhelmed again.

FOUR STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT

Children, typical or special needs, are persistent when they really want something. We developed a simple system that helps our son understand exactly how many times he can ask for something before facing consequences.

If he asks for something we can easily provide, we immediately say yes. He doesn't need to ask twice, and we don't want him forming the habit of repeating requests. If he asks for something we'll give later but can't provide immediately, he's learned to accept a delayed yes. He'll wait patiently until the time is right or the condition is met.

But when we say no to something he really wants, that's when the "four strikes" rule becomes important:

The first time we say no, he might accept it if his desire isn't that strong. But if he really wants something, he'll ask again. This second request signals the strength of his desire.

At this point, we reconsider our answer. If our reasons for saying no weren't as strong as his desire seems to be, we might change our mind. If our reasons remain compelling, we'll repeat the no and explain why.

With typical children, this is often where debates begin. With my son, there's usually not much debate, but he might still ask a third time.

After the third request, we invoke what we call the "no nagging" rule. We tell him "no nagging," and he knows it's time to stop asking. Over the years, we've taught him various synonyms for nagging, turning it into a bit of a family game:

"No badgering" is our favorite. He came up with "no repeating." His grandmother added "no browbeating." His great aunt contributed "no haranguing."

This works because he knows that after asking a third time, if he continues, he'll lose access to treats or other current currency. The fourth request triggers a warning that he's about to lose privileges.

At this point, he often begs forgiveness and promises to stop asking, hoping to avoid the consequence. We usually forgive him so that he sees the value of making amends. If he doesn't seek forgiveness or asks a fifth time, the consequence is applied without exception. This consistency helps him understand that continuing down this path will always lead to an outcome he doesn't want.

This approach has been remarkably effective over the years, allowing our son to express his desires clearly while maintaining reasonable boundaries. It minimizes stress for everyone involved.

DON'T LET ANGER OR ANXIETY GROW

By far, the most challenging issue we face with our son is anxiety. Helping him stay calm is essential to maintaining emotional control. People tend to lose their ability to reason and control their behavior when experiencing extreme emotions. Anger is particularly problematic, but anxiety is equally disruptive. Once these emotions take hold, they're like a forest fire that finds more fuel and burns out of control.

Our most reliable defense against these powerful emotions is practicing calming techniques—breaking the cycle of upset and engaging in specific behaviors designed to prevent emotions from escalating. My son isn't on any medications, so he's naturally excitable and full of energy. He gets excited and flaps his hands vigorously, a common behavior among autistic individuals. When pleased, he experiences intense joy. We don't want to suppress these positive feelings, which is one reason we've chosen not to medicate him. Sometimes when I see the pure joy he feels over simple things, I feel a flash of envy that quickly transforms into shared happiness.

When he believes he's done something wrong, he gets upset, as most of us would. However, he doesn't have a wide range of coping strategies, so his distress can escalate rapidly. He's particularly sensitive to situations where he thinks he's being reprimanded when he believed he was following the rules. While anyone would be upset by feeling falsely accused, my son can transform ordinary misunderstandings into full meltdowns.

WHEN CONTROL IS LOST

When my son loses self-control, the aftermath is emotionally devastating for our entire family. He recovers almost immediately, I bounce back fairly quickly, but his mother finds these episodes much harder to process.

We experienced one such incident while I was writing this book. We were eating lunch at a restaurant before a planned afternoon activity. At the end of the meal, he gave me a hug, but his hands weren't clean, and he wiped food all over my white sleeves.

I expressed disappointment—not angrily, but clearly enough that he understood I was displeased with the mess. He became upset because he thought he was being kind and loving but didn't get the positive reaction he expected. It was partly my fault for reacting poorly, but once set in motion, the situation quickly spiraled.

He reached across the table and squeezed his mother's arms hard to express his frustration. Then he hurt himself because he knew it would upset us. Despite being in a public restaurant, I had to reach across the table to break his grip from his mother's forearms. My wife had the presence of mind to guide him through yoga breathing to help him calm down, which he did. He immediately began apologizing profusely, but the damage was already done.

Later, my wife, still upset, told me I needed to include this story in the book. "This entire book is just your fantasy," she said. "Our lives really aren't that great." Now you know.

Living with a special needs child or adult has its rewards, but it's not all rainbows and unicorns. We have real struggles. We try to muddle through, making the best decisions we can. We try to overcome obstacles with love and understanding. Some days are still better than others.

Techniques That Have Helped

Over the years, we've learned to apply specific techniques to help our son remain calm. Yoga breathing has been surprisingly effective. He understands the concept and knows to stop and take slow, deep breaths when he's getting upset. He'll even proactively calm himself when he feels distress building.

We taught him a simple mantra—"calm, happy, relaxed"—to help him remember what he's trying to achieve. He'll repeat these words while taking deep breaths. These two techniques together diffuse most potential problems before they escalate.

The key is early intervention. Disturbing emotions build strength on their own, like a fire that begins from a single spark. Just as it's easier to extinguish a fire when it's just beginning, emotional turmoil is much easier to address before it becomes overwhelming.

When I look back on our journey, I realize that these behavior management techniques weren't just about controlling difficult situations—they were about teaching our son the skills he needs to navigate a complex world. Every time we help him calm himself or guide him through a challenging moment, we're investing in his future independence and emotional well-being.

No parent gets it right all the time. We've made plenty of mistakes along the way. But finding these practical approaches to managing behavior has made our home more peaceful and our son more confident. And in the end, that's what matters most.

A WAYWARD SON

THE RELUCTANT ROAD TO ACCEPTING DEFEAT

We knew early on that my son would never gain independence. The diagnosis wasn't the shock—the finality was. The question staring us in the face wasn't whether his condition would improve, but what we were going to do about it for the rest of our lives. Neither my wife nor I wanted to put him in an institution, so we understood our fate: we were destined to be lifelong caregivers.

At the time, this felt like resignation to something undesirable. This wasn't what either of us planned when we dreamed of having a family. But it was our duty as his parents, and we knew we were going to see it through. There wasn't any joy in the idea. I felt it as a weight around my neck. My wife joked grimly about being a maid for life. Neither of us had opened our minds and hearts to the opportunity presented to us.

I remember sitting at the kitchen table one night after my son had gone to bed. My wife was washing dishes, and I was staring at a pile of medical bills.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm drowning," I said quietly.

She turned off the faucet and dried her hands. "I know. Me too."

We weren't just tired. We were experiencing the malaise of accepting something negative. I felt I was being forced to accept something substandard, not good. There was a sense of doom and depression hanging over me. It never occurred to me to look for the unique goodness in my circumstances.

I deeply understood that resignation is not acceptance. I tried to claim I accepted my son and my life circumstances, but I really didn't. I would have changed my circumstances if that were possible. I was resisting what was, and still is. When I realized that, I knew that resignation wasn't acceptance. Resignation is still resistance. I decided that accepting the negative wasn't the right answer. It wasn't a call to strengthen my denial. I needed to reframe how I viewed the situation and redefine what victory looked like. The alternative was lifelong unhappiness.

There is supposed to be a way to be happy irrespective of circumstances. Not that I knew how to do that. But it gave me hope that there was an answer.

NOT ACCEPTING YOUR CHILD AS BROKEN

Many parents believe that accepting their special needs child is accepting defeat. They accept the condition exists but view their child as broken and defective. This is the final trap that catches all but a few lucky parents. It's the default condition when all denial is exhausted. The purpose of acceptance is not to grin and bear it. You are not looking for the sliver of good in something overwhelmingly bad.

Heroic stories of acceptance often miss the point. Most of the books on autism propagate the view that autistic children are broken and need to be fixed. A recent trend in these books is to glorify stories from parents who accept their "broken" children. These acceptance stories portray the parents as heroic. After all, they must endure something really awful, right?

If they accept their "broken" child, they've failed to recognize that their child was never broken to begin with.

Your child is not broken. You are.

Did you have a reaction to that idea? Did it make you angry that I suggested that you might be the broken one? How does it make you feel to be viewed as the broken one? Is it pleasant? Do you feel accepted or uplifted?

Now think about this: How does your child feel every time you look into their eyes, and they know you think they are broken, defective, not acceptable, not lovable?

Put this book down and sit with the for a minute. Let the pain, the horror of that feeling penetrate your heart. It's a pain you inflict on your special child every day.

You must change how you view your child. There is no acceptance while you view your child as broken. Children do not need to conform to some neurotypical standard set by you or by others. You must learn to view them as perfect, or perfectly acceptable just the way they are.

MY SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Accepting my special needs child was the answer to my own spiritual quest. My son had to be the key. He is a source of strong emotions for me. My emotions were conflicted, which served as a disturbance to my peace of mind. There was no joy and happiness unless I found a way to overcome my grief.

However, I was trapped in the negative judgments from my initial reaction to the diagnosis. I defined my problem as the need to accept the bad. I was supposed to acquire a taste for shitburgers, as crude as that sounds. I couldn't conceive of another way.

I didn't realize that I had made a mistake years ago, when I first realized my son was special. I made a natural reactive judgment that my son's condition was bad. That bad judgment was never questioned. It provided a conceptual framework to interpret everything that followed. I had created a prison in my own mind, and I was trapped inside it. Since I didn't know I was trapped in a mistaken belief, I couldn't see a way out of my dilemma.

ACCEPTANCE IS THE OPPONENT TO ANGER

Acceptance is a mind that welcomes whatever occurs without resistance. We constantly make judgments about what we want, what we don't want, and when we want it. These judgments set up the conditions for disappointment and for anger to arise. The stronger our preferences, the stronger our reaction will be when things don't turn out as we want.

The mind of acceptance has no strongly held preferences with no importance on fulfillment. Acceptance is the opposite of resistance. **Acceptance is to wholeheartedly accept things exactly as they are and not want for circumstances to be any different.** This was the definition of acceptance that changed my life.

Acceptance requires two related spiritual practices: a mind of non-judgment and a mind of non-attachment. It's difficult to obtain and sustain a mind of acceptance without the other two practices.

NON-JUDGMENT SUPPORTS ACCEPTANCE

The three conditions that generate anger require a judgment as to what's desirable or undesirable. When you obtain something you want, you judge it to be good. If you fail to obtain something you want, you judge it to be bad. If you obtain something you don't want, you judge it to be bad.

If you don't make the good or bad judgment, whatever you obtain or fail to obtain doesn't have the power to upset you. If you don't put much importance behind the judgment, whatever occurs doesn't have the ability to upset

you either. With a mind of non-judgment, even what most would consider dire circumstances won't disrupt your peace of mind.

Acceptance makes no judgments about good or bad that would trigger attachment or aversion. Acceptance revels in pleasure without clutching after it and endures pain without pushing it away. Acceptance takes whatever comes and ignores the rest.

Non-attachment Supports Acceptance

If you clutch after objects, you will become distraught when they're consumed or lost. If you cling to people, you will become upset when they fail to meet your expectations or leave you. Whether it be objects or people, if you lose something that's important to you, you will suffer due to your attachment. If you don't resist the loss, if you accept whatever happens, the loss may sadden you, but it won't be a cause of suffering. And you won't get angry about it.

Impermanence Overcomes Attachment

We all form attachments. Whenever you obtain a resource you feel is important, whether this be a person, place, or thing, you naturally don't want to lose it. Parting is not sweet sorrow. Losing something you value is painful. Digesting this loss requires enduring sadness. Resisting the loss makes it worse and leads to suffering.

The sting of attachment comes in other forms as well. Sometimes you obtain things you didn't want, like an illness. Sometimes you fail to obtain the thing at all, creating longing and disappointment. The most common reaction to loss is anger, resisting what is, and avoiding accepting reality.

How to Avoid Forming Attachment

Gratitude for every moment helps avoid forming attachment. If you are keenly aware of your good fortune to be alive, have sufficient resources, and enjoy a few comforts, then you can revel in each moment as precious. When conditions change, you let go of what you had and embrace the new reality.

Meditating on death and the facts surrounding death is the cornerstone of addressing attachment. In addition, it serves to motivate you to focus on what's really important rather than wasting effort on worldly concerns.

I meditate on death often, and for a time, it was a primary practice. Meditation on death changed my life. I devote my time and energy to my son because of the death meditation.

I stopped pursuing extraneous worldly concerns that were largely motivated by the desire to make more money and consume more. I stopped chasing fame, fortune, or status of any kind.

I still provide for my family, but I do it for them, not for me. I learned a key lesson about impermanence, which helps me with my attachments.

You Are Going to Die

Mostly, we go through life seeking objects of our desire, laboring under the false idea that happiness can be found in wealth, status, or a good reputation. We expend tremendous amounts of energy toward obtaining things and attaching ourselves to them, only to find disappointment when these things don't bring us the happiness we desire.

You've heard the expression, "you can't take it with you," and we all intellectually know that to be true, but do we really live our lives as if it were true?

Consider the following story:

Some children were playing beside a river. They made castles of sand, and each child defended his castle and said, "This one is mine." They kept their castles separate and would not allow any mistakes about which was whose. When the castles were all finished, one child kicked over someone else's castle and completely destroyed it. The owner of the castle flew into a rage, pulled the other child's hair, struck him with his fist and bawled out, "He has spoiled my castle! Come along all of you and help me punish him as he deserves." The others all came to his help. They beat the child... then they went on playing in their sand castles, each saying, "This is mine; no one else may have it. Keep away! Don't touch my castle!" But evening came, it was getting dark and they all thought they ought to be going home. No one now cared what became of his castle. One child stamped on his, another pushed his over with both hands. Then they turned away and went back, each to his home.

Do we act any differently than these children? We live our lives building castles in the sand only to leave them behind as meaningless when the long night of death falls.

Imagine for a moment that you accomplished everything you wanted in life. You succeeded in all your worldly affairs. Perhaps you're Jeff Bezos and you've accumulated a $100 billion fortune. Or perhaps you're Tom Brady and you won seven Super Bowls. While these are amazing accomplishments, both of these men will die, and when they do, they won't be taking any of their wealth or attainments with them. In fact, if they cling to their attainments on their deathbed, they will feel anguish and sorrow, and they will endure a great deal of suffering. How will their worldly attainments benefit them then?

You are going to die. You could die today. None of your worldly attainments or possessions are important. You won't be taking any of it with you.

Shortly after your death, your possessions will be disbursed to various people, and your corpse will be disposed of.

A form of you remains in the memories of those who knew you. Those who outlive you may remember you kindly, or they may not. You may have a memorial headstone, or no permanent record of you may exist at all.

Everything you worked for, struggled against, hoped, dreamed, felt—everything will be summarized by a dash between the dates on your gravestone. Most people won't have any more details on your life than what's contained in that dash.

After your funeral service, most people will go back to their self-important thoughts, and thoughts of you will arise less and less often until you are finally forgotten.

A hundred years after your death, everyone who knew you will also be dead (not that they spent much time remembering you anyway), and nobody will visit your gravestone. Even your gravestone will finally be forgotten or destroyed.

All evidence of your existence will be gone.

As the band Styx pointed out in "Nothing Ever Goes as Planned": "Even pharaohs turn to sand, like a drop in the ocean."

Given these facts, why would you waste your time building castles in the sand?

Given these facts, why would you attach yourself to anything?

If you don't attach yourself to life and worry about everything, life becomes a grand adventure full of fun and excitement. When items you desire come to you, you enjoy them with thanks, and then you let them go.

Recognize the Impermanence of All Things

When you recognize nothing lasts forever, you aren't as inclined to attach yourself to it because you know you won't be keeping it forever. This doesn't just apply to objects, but also to people and life circumstances.

When you have something pleasant and impermanent, the natural reaction is to feel thankful for what you have. Thankfulness is the opposite of entitlement. You cherish objects, people, circumstances while they last more than before because you know you won't have them later. Impermanence doesn't make you hold tighter; impermanence helps you let go.

Attachment and Your Special Needs Child

I am attached to my special needs child. It's hard to write a book like this without coming across as someone who believes they have it all figured out. I don't. I am still attached to my special needs child. My aunt and uncle lost their son tragically several years ago. Every day I think about my cousin. His death reminds me about the preciousness of each day with my son. My compassion for their pain shows me the depth of my own attachment to my son.

Special needs children are helpless, which makes them dependent. This brings out the caretaking instincts and makes them even more lovable, in my opinion. My relationship with my son is the most important feature of my life.

My son, and my attachment to him, is something I work on. I can write about the need to reduce my attachments. I find recognition of impermanence helpful as I appreciate my time with my son more. But I can't honestly say it's eliminated my attachment to him. If he were no longer a part of my life, the sadness would be difficult to bear. I watched my aunt and uncle endure the loss of their son, and it was heartbreakingly difficult.

Your Special Needs Child After Your Death

Every parent worries about what will happen to their children when they die. Parents of special needs children have added worries. Who will take care of your child? Who will love them? Will they be exploited or abused? Unfortunately, these fears are made worse by news stories where these fears come true.

There are social safety nets in place. Social services will always feel inadequate. Everyone wants the best. Social services are chronically underfunded. High-tax states have better programs. But they do exist.

Someone will be responsible for your child's care. Government social workers, friends, family, community—developing and maintaining strong social ties in your community will help with your peace of mind.

Asset Planning and Special Needs Trusts

If you are fortunate enough to leave behind assets, you can take extra precautions to ensure your child's care. Special needs trusts designate three important parties. Basically, you pay to set up the support system to provide more than state social services provide on their own.

The attorneys that administer the trust and settle disputes, the financial trustees appointed by you or your attorney to manage the money, and the advocates who know your child (adult) and advise the trustees on how to spend the money to benefit your child. These advocates can be family, friends, or charities that do this work.

If your special needs child has siblings, and if they maintain close ties, that person is natural support. I had a co-worker for two years whose older brother was autistic. I had many conversations with her on what that meant to her and how she felt about that familial responsibility. For her it was an unquestioned duty that she took on with love and compassion. Perhaps she was exceptional, but I suspect her outlook is more the rule than the exception. Unfortunately for my son, he is an only child.

Having a special needs trust in place is insurance for peace of mind.

NON-JUDGMENT AND YOUR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

Did you immediately judge your child's condition negatively? When you realized your child was special, did you assume your life was permanently changed for the worse? I did. Did you assume your child would be a lifelong burden on you? In your self-centered musings, did you ever stop to think about how being special impacted your child?

I was guilty of all these terrible thoughts. You're not bad for your thoughts and reactions. Just don't get stuck there. Since you concluded having a special needs child was negative, have you questioned that judgment? Are you completely certain that it's bad?

Do you condemn your child due to their condition? This is surprisingly common. The belief is rooted in the notion that the child will change to avoid your condemnation. It fails with typical children too. But it's particularly counter-productive with a special needs child. They didn't choose their condition. And they can't correct it. Negative judgments make you and your special needs child unhappy. You won't cherish your child if you view them negatively. You will resist your child being who they are. You will subject your child to futile treatments to try to make them something they are not.

Abandoning your negative judgments about your child and their condition is the first step in curing your dysfunction. Your child has special needs, something you deal with.

Your child is fine; you are the one with a problem.

I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

I knew I needed to change the way I viewed my son, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how. It's one thing to recognize you need to shift your perspective; it's another thing entirely to actually do it. I felt stuck between what was and what could be—caught in that frustrating space where I knew something better was possible, but the path forward remained hidden.

What I needed was a guide—someone or something to show me the way through this foggy landscape of emotions I'd been wandering through. I'd spent so many years looking at my son's autism as a problem to solve rather than a reality to embrace. But something was changing inside me. The clouds in my mind were beginning to part, allowing rays of understanding to shine through.

I knew I couldn't go back to my old thinking patterns. I'd tried that approach—seeing my son as broken, focusing on what was "wrong" with him, and exhausting myself trying to "fix" what I perceived as damage. That path had only led to more pain and frustration for both of us.

There is no genuine acceptance when your heart is filled with negative judgment and resistance. I finally understood that the task wasn't to accept that my child was broken. That approach was fundamentally flawed from the start.

Though I couldn't see clearly what lay ahead, I sensed there was something more waiting to be discovered. A different kind of relationship with my son, a different understanding of his autism, a different experience of parenthood. For the first time in years, I felt hope bubbling up inside me—hope that I could find happiness, joy, and peace of mind again, not in spite of my son's autism but somehow in harmony with it.

DEFINITION OF ACCEPTANCE

In my spiritual quest for answers, I stumbled upon a definition of acceptance that stopped me in my tracks. It was simple yet utterly challenging: **Wholeheartedly accepting things as they are with no desire for things to be any different.**

I couldn't wrap my mind around that. It seemed not just difficult but impossible. That couldn't possibly be right, could it? I'd always thought acceptance meant finding a way to deal with what was bad—learning to live with an unfortunate situation while still acknowledging its inherent negativity.

"How can I pretend something is good when it's actually bad?" I asked myself. "And how can I see what is clearly bad as anything other than bad?" It felt like a dilemma with no solution, a mental puzzle I couldn't solve.

Wouldn't I always have a burning desire for my son to have a "normal" life? How could I possibly want for him to be autistic? Wouldn't that mean I was giving up on him? These questions haunted me, creating inner resistance at every turn.

My resistance to this definition came at me from every angle. Which, if I'm honest, was a strong indication I was probably onto something important. I've learned through experience that whenever I have such a strong emotional reaction to an idea, I should stop and consider why.

Was it because the definition was fundamentally wrong? If so, why was I having such a visceral reaction to it? Or was it because the definition was right, and I just didn't want to believe it? Perhaps denial was responsible for my agitation.

EMOTIVE MEDITATION

I've discovered that answers are only as good as the questions posed. Understanding and processing this definition of acceptance would require me to question my basic assumptions and ask better questions—questions that would lead me toward growth rather than keep me spinning in circles.

What I found most challenging was that intellectual understanding often precedes emotional understanding by years. Knowing something in your mind is not the same as knowing it in your heart. There's a vast difference between comprehending a concept intellectually and embodying it emotionally.

To help bridge this gap, I began working with a form of meditation focused on thoughts and feelings. Some traditions call it object meditation, others contemplative meditation, and new age practitioners might describe it as a form of mindfulness meditation. Whatever the name, it's the process of thinking about concepts and working to sustain and build the feelings that arise.

This practice is more than just watching your mind. It isn't passive observation of random thoughts. Emotive meditation is extremely focused. The practice engages thought, but you don't follow trains of thought as they naturally arise. You aren't trying to empty the mind and purge all thinking. Instead, you focus on specific thoughts and concepts while allowing yourself to follow the currents of feelings these thoughts generate.

It's a technique for mental and emotional purification. I found that the mind can be purified to eliminate suffering by changing the emotional weights assigned to thoughts. This makes it more demanding than standard mindfulness meditation, which doesn't attempt to direct thought or feeling. I came to see mindfulness meditation as a pre-practice warm-up—it strengthens the capacity for observation and focus, which you need before moving into emotive work.

HOW EMOTIVE MEDITATION WORKS

Each thought carries emotional content. Some thoughts feel pleasant, others unpleasant, and some relatively neutral. These emotions can be weak or intense. The emotional content of our thoughts generates identifiable feelings in our bodies and minds.

Emotive meditation starts with a thought or concept to contemplate. Often these ideas are associated with why you want to do something or not do something. They contain the "whys" and benefits of certain practices.

When the thought generates a feeling, the meditation involves holding that feeling as long as possible. If the feeling fades, you return to the contemplation to regenerate it. This can be done over and over again, building a stronger connection to the emotional content of the thought.

With practice, you can hold the feeling and explore its flavors and variations. You can flow with currents of feelings, noticing how they shift and change.

When contemplating reasons for practices, you might remember times when the reason proved true in your life. For example, compassion is a feeling that mixes joy and sadness, and feelings of compassion differ based on the circumstances, providing different emotional flavors.

Emotive meditation is like being marinated. The feelings seep into other thoughts, changing how you experience your life. For example, the thought "special needs children are helpless and endure much unnecessary suffering" generates compassion.

If it's a fleeting thought, it doesn't carry much weight, and it's unlikely to change behavior. However, if you spend a lot of time thinking about that fact and imagine what their lives are like, it will increase your motivation to do something to make circumstances better. At least it did for me, or this book wouldn't have been written.

RESISTING THE NEW DEFINITION OF ACCEPTANCE

I struggled with the definition of acceptance, questioning it from multiple angles. Shouldn't acceptance provide an opportunity for dealing with things you don't want or desire? Accepting what you think is good is easy, but it wouldn't be called acceptance if it wasn't hard to accept what you think is bad, right? Isn't the "bad" implicit within the definition?

The answer I eventually found was that acceptance is embracing something completely with no resistance. You aren't trying to digest what's bad. You are challenged to recognize *it wasn't bad to begin with.*

Your judgment was premature at best and incorrect at worst. Acceptance is a call to suspend judgment and recognize that if you suspend judgment, there is no "bad" for you to accept.

I also wondered how one could accept injustice and other events that seem objectively bad. Not everything can be rationalized away as not bad—the death of a child, random violence, the fruits of evil, ethnic cleansing, the suffering of special needs children. These things seem undeniably negative.

The answer that gradually emerged for me was that good or bad is a point of view. Even universal agreement on the judgment doesn't make the negative judgment desirable. The judgment itself is the problem. Strong opinions provide profound unhappiness.

I believe all the items I listed are undesirable—bad, if you prefer. But acceptance isn't about right or wrong, good or evil. A meteor destroying the earth would be undesirable, but it could be accepted. Suspending judgment is a personal spiritual practice. Even if the entire world agrees with your negative judgment, the judgment itself is still upsetting.

The intent isn't to be aligned with the collective judgment of others or the imagined judgment of God. This is why so many religious people are not happy. Many believe their opinions are absolutely right and backed by the righteousness of God. Those who behave this way lack the basic wisdom and humility to see that they are not God, and they can't judge with the certainty of God.

When reality intervenes, when "what is" conflicts with their god-inspired truth, they either retreat into denial or become deeply despondent. In many cultures, people hide their special needs children out of fear of judgment. The special needs child is perceived as a punishment from God for some sin.

The intent of acceptance is to prevent the negative internal states associated with negative judgment. If the judgment is not made, the negative feelings associated with that judgment do not arise.

WHAT EXACTLY IS DESIRE?

As I rolled these questions around in my mind over many months, I came to realize the word "desire" needs a careful definition. You can parse the difference between want and desire. The difference is not academic or legalistic—it reveals the core of spiritual practice and a method for overcoming attachment.

Desire is the emotional measure of aversion, pain, and anger obtained when the desire is thwarted. Wanting is the emotional measure of the joy, pleasure, and satisfaction obtained from fruition of the want. Desire is bad or unskillful, and wanting is necessary, good, and skillful. Wanting and desire are completely different and separate measures of emotion, though most people incorrectly see them as inseparable, either the same thing or different sides of the same coin.

Let me give an example of big wanting with little desire: I want to win the lottery. I would feel much joy, pleasure, and satisfaction from winning. However, I have little or no desire to win the lottery. If it doesn't happen, I am not upset by it. My expectation of winning the lottery is low. My life will be good whether I win or lose.

In contrast, here's an example of little wanting and big desire: I don't want an asteroid to hit the earth. I don't derive much satisfaction from knowing each day that an asteroid didn't hit the earth. I had a low expectation of the event. It's more difficult to be thankful or derive much satisfaction for what doesn't occur.

However, I have a big desire for the asteroid to miss the earth. The death of billions of people would be the cause of much pain and suffering and would require the digestion of a lot of sadness. Though I can accept the loss and endure the sadness, I don't want to. Nobody wants to increase the amount of sadness they must endure, even if meditating on compassion is part of your spiritual practice. You don't set out to create sadness.

HOW TO WANT WITHOUT DESIRE

This is one of the most perplexing challenges in spiritual practice. It's a viable solution to overcome attachment. I haven't achieved it, but I recognize it is the goal. It provides me clarity on what I want to accomplish.

Many people falsely believe that in order to eliminate your attachments, you must stop wanting things. People who attempt this become strangely detached from everything. You can't feel compassion if you don't want people to be happy and free from suffering.

I want to help special needs children and parents. If my book doesn't help them, I will be sad that I missed an opportunity, but it will not become a source of pain and suffering for me as I will accept the sadness. If I had not wanted to write this book for fear of attachment, you wouldn't be reading it now, and any positive impact it may have would have been lost.

You can't achieve a high level of spiritual liberation if you don't want it. Trying to stop wanting is a spiritual ditch, a dead end in failure. Wanting without desire is a practiced skill.

The key to reducing and eliminating attachments is to reduce the importance of satisfying those wants. In the lottery example, you could see how wanting can be large, but the importance of obtaining can be essentially zero.

When obtaining objects of wanting is reduced to an importance of zero, you obtain all the upside of joy, happiness, and satisfaction when you get what you want, and you avoid all the pain and suffering when you don't get what you want. You enjoy objects of desire when they come to you and release them when they don't.

So what is the key to reducing the importance of obtaining objects of desire to zero? Meditation on or contemplation of the impermanence of all things, and the practice of gratitude and thankfulness. More on that later.

WON'T ACCEPTANCE REDUCE MY MOTIVATION?

I wondered: If I accepted my son's condition as good, wouldn't I stop trying to help him? I want my son to continue to grow and improve to overcome his limitations. If that doesn't happen, I will be sad, but I will accept it. I want for him to improve, but as I've defined it, I don't desire it. Wouldn't my acceptance reduce my motivation to help him?

The answer I found was that acceptance is not resignation. I can strive to help my son gain more independence while still accepting his current level. Acceptance is about embracing what is. Resistance is a strong motivator but a spiritually draining one.

How could I want my son to be autistic? How could I want my son to be dependent on others his whole life? How could I want my son to be isolated by his lack of social skills—no friends, no wife, no children, no relationships outside his family? How could I want that for him?

The answer is that acceptance is not about wanting what are perceived as negative circumstances. One hundred and eighty degrees from wrong is also wrong. I can accept those circumstances for what they are without the negative judgment.

I've wrestled with these distinctions, tried to put them into practice, and evaluated the results. I still do this today. Spiritual practice evolves and improves through experience. It isn't a "once and done" kind of thing. You never achieve spiritual perfection.

If you were "enlightened," it wouldn't mean that you stop being mentally disciplined. It would mean you found the practices that sustain your peaceful mental and emotional states.

Through this journey toward acceptance, I've discovered that seeing clearly isn't about having perfect vision—it's about removing the filters of judgment that distort what we see.

When I look at my son now, I still see autism, but I no longer see it as something that needs fixing. Instead, I see it as part of who he is, part of what makes him uniquely himself. And in that clear-eyed vision, I've found a peace I never thought possible.

LIVE AND LEARN

THE FREEDOM OF NON-JUDGMENT

Our minds are constantly making judgments. That's good. This is bad. I want this. I don't want that. It's how we navigate the world. But I've learned through my journey with my son that these very judgments—these seemingly innocent categorizations of experiences—are often the source of our deepest suffering.

When we first received my son's diagnosis, my immediate judgment was clear: this is terrible. This is not what I wanted. This is a problem that needs fixing. And that single judgment planted a seed of suffering that grew for years.

Our judgments of good and bad, desirable and undesirable, become the foundation for so many emotional struggles. Our comparisons fuel jealousy—I found myself envying parents with typical children, silently judging their "easier" lives while resenting my difficult path. Our positive judgments—"this is what happiness looks like"—lead to attachment and eventually pain when we inevitably lose what we cling to.

Perhaps most insidious are our negative judgments. Even without any external consequences, the very act of labeling something as "bad" disturbs our peace of mind. That constant mental rejection creates an undercurrent of resistance that follows us everywhere.

I realized something profound: even if my judgments about my son's autism were completely accurate (and they weren't), the judgments themselves were causing me emotional disturbance. My negative assessment of his condition upset me for many years—long after I'd accepted the reality of our situation.

LEARNING TO SUSPEND JUDGMENT

The simple truth about judgment is that we're often mistaken. We rarely have all the facts. We don't know people's true motivations. We have no idea about the larger context that might completely change the meaning of what we're experiencing.

The funny thing is, we imagine we know all these things—but we don't. Not even close.

I'd like to share some stories that helped me break the habit of snap judgments. These aren't just stories to read once and forget. Think of them as tools for what I call emotive meditation. Read them multiple times. Reflect on their meaning. Allow your mind to link them to your own experiences. Let them sink deeper into your understanding of truth.

THE SNIPER'S STORY

Suppose I told you about a man who personally shot and killed over 300 people. Would you immediately judge him as evil? As a monster?

Now what if I told you this person was a sniper in World War II serving his country? Does that change your judgment?

This man, Matthäus Hetzenauer, was German, fighting for the losing side—the side responsible for the Holocaust. Does that make him bad again?

What if he wasn't aware of the Holocaust (as many Germans weren't)? Does that make him good?

What if I told you he took personal satisfaction in being a skilled killer? Bad again?

And what if he had been American, or whatever your nationality is, fighting for your cause? Good again?

Who is to say which people are good or bad? We rarely have all the facts. We seldom know what truly motivated people to do what they did. And even if you somehow had complete information, are you really comfortable pronouncing righteous judgment, weighing all the extenuating circumstances? Are you God?

Given how little we actually know, how can we be certain about our judgments of good or bad in other people? I've found it's wiser to suspend judgment about people or events, acknowledging my incomplete information.

Once you internalize the problems with making absolute judgments, you'll make them less often. And when you do catch yourself judging, you'll temper it with the recognition that you could be mistaken, reducing the certainty that causes so much suffering.

THE ZEN FARMER'S WISDOM

Contemplating the next story changed my outlook in profound ways. It eliminated the certainty in my judgments about whether things were good or bad. It smoothed out the emotional roller coaster of life's dramas. Most importantly, it reduced my resistance to "undesirable" outcomes and my fear of what might happen.

Once upon the time, there was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically.

"Maybe," the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed.

"Maybe," replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his terrible misfortune.

"Maybe," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out.

"Maybe," said the farmer.

This simple story shows us profound wisdom. The farmer understands the true nature of life—that you can't judge any event as an "end." There aren't definite breaks separating one moment from another, and there isn't a perfectly formulated outcome toward which everything builds.

There's always tomorrow. And whether today was good or bad, a million effects can arise from a single event. Good and bad are interconnected—two sides of the same coin. If things seem perfect, they aren't. Things can change in an instant, at all times. And they will, sooner or later.

But I think the story of the farmer and the horse doesn't go far enough. It isn't only about our initial judgments of external events. The decisions we make based on those judgments often lead to poor outcomes in completely

avoidable ways. The initial judgment is like planting a seed in our minds. The subsequent decisions and behaviors nurture and grow that seed into a vigorous weed that can eventually take over our emotional landscape.

When "Good Fortune" Becomes a Curse

Let me give you a more modern example. If you were to win the lottery, you'd immediately judge that as something wonderful. You'd imagine all the things you could buy with your new fortune. You'd picture the release from financial stress. You'd feel euphoric. Your belief about the goodness of this event would be absolute and unshakable.

But people who've won the lottery often discover there's plenty of bad that comes with the supposed good. Family and friends start asking for money. If they say no, they lose relationships. If they say yes, they encourage dependency and grow to resent the people asking. Their finances suddenly become much more complicated. They need to spend money on people to manage their money and taxes.

They begin to fear losing their fortune. Rather than finding peace of mind, they start to worry about not having money. They suspect people are out to exploit their generosity or steal from them. Many become miserly and practice generosity less often than before their windfall.

The Woman Who Lost Herself

Let me tell you about a real woman who won the California lottery in the early 1980s. She worked for a local charity because she enjoyed a life of service to others. She struggled financially because she lived in an expensive area with a low-paying job.

When she won the lottery, all her financial worries vanished overnight. She moved out of her small apartment into a large luxury home. She took her payout over 20 years of even payments, which provided several times what she made from her job.

At this point, the external circumstances were great, but the internal changes started to surface. She could have kept working a job she loved in service of others. She could have donated even more to charities doing good work. She could have devoted her time and resources to any number of good and emotionally enriching causes.

She did none of that.

She took a sabbatical from work to rearrange her life. The charity she worked for was understanding and accommodating. She purchased her new home and settled in. She particularly enjoyed sunning herself at her new pool and entertaining friends. She shared her excitement with friends about returning to work and doing good things with her newfound fortune.

But gradually, she came to enjoy her life of luxury a bit too much. One day, sitting alone by her pool, she asked herself if she really wanted to go back to work. The commute from the new house would be much longer. Some of the paperwork was drudgery and took time away from helping people. She noticed that some of her coworkers seemed to be jealous of her new circumstances.

She found her resistance to going back stronger than her desire to return to her old job. The thought of enjoying her relaxing freedom to work on her tan was enticing. Little by little, she surrendered a career of working

for the benefit of others for a lifestyle of benefiting herself. In the process, she set conditions in motion that led to even worse decisions.

She started to complain about the cost of hired help. Since she wasn't working anymore, she didn't have that income to supplement her spending. Her new house was luxurious but expensive to maintain. The maid who cooked her food, did her laundry, and cleaned her house cost a lot. The gardeners who mowed her lawn, planted her flowers, and maintained the grounds were another expense. The pool maintenance person who made sure the water she swam in was clean also cost money.

She realized that paying all this staff prevented her from traveling more. Rather than feeling gratitude for all these people did to make her comfortable, she resented how much she had to pay them. She was becoming more self-important and less charitable toward others.

As the years went by, she became lazier, more self-indulgent, and she stopped giving to charities altogether because she needed to cover the cost of her own lifestyle.

After about 15 years, she started to worry about what would happen when the lottery payments stopped. But she didn't do anything about this worry. She didn't go back to school or seek a job. The worry grew stronger and more debilitating, but she did nothing to remedy it.

When the payments stopped in year 20, she looked for other sources of money. Her luxury home in California had greatly appreciated in value. She still had a small mortgage that she had paid down over 20 years, but she had millions in home equity. Since lenders at the time were providing home equity loans up to 100% of the value of the home, she took the money.

She borrowed against her house in what amounted to a personal Ponzi scheme until the crash of 2008 wiped out much of the value of her home. She no longer had lottery income, and the lenders stopped supporting her home equity borrowing. She was cut off.

She had spent 25 years nurturing a deep sense of personal entitlement. She was accustomed to lavish spending and living in a luxury mansion. She gained no skills that would help her earn a living. She became increasingly self-involved and indulgent. She stopped caring for or working for the benefit of others. When she lost everything, which she did, she was emotionally devastated.

Her initial judgment was that winning the lottery was a good thing. She reinforced this judgment with 25 years of self-indulgence. In the end, it all came crashing down—not due to some unforeseen outside force, but due to the results of her own poor decisions.

Do you think winning the lottery was good for her? I'm not so sure anymore.

THE PRIMORDIAL ERROR

Your reaction to your child's diagnosis was likely similar to mine—you judged it as negative. In the opening of this book, I asked you to suspend your disbelief and open yourself to the idea that your special needs child was not a curse. Everything you've read up to this point has been gently opening the door of your mind to this possibility.

When you came to realize and accept that you had a special needs child, you probably judged that negatively. It was a problem that needed fixing. It was an unacceptable outcome for you and your child. This was a cloud with no silver lining. It was all bad, and you were being forced to live with it.

That judgment was wrong.

That negative judgment was the seed you planted in your mind many years ago. You've been nurturing that idea for years. Every experience you've had with your child and others has been filtered through that negative judgment. Your interpretations of events have served to reinforce your initial judgment. That seed has grown into a deeply rooted tree with thick branches and poisonous fruit. It's so deeply rooted that it's become part of your identity. You believe the poisonous fruit is something you must eat to survive.

It's all a mistake.

You must cut that tree down, reject its fruit, dig out its roots, and destroy its seeds. It's no easy task, but it's essential for both you and your child. The good news is that by reading this far, you've already begun the process.

I promise you this: suspending judgment about your child's condition will bring you more peace than any therapy, medication, or miracle cure ever could. It won't change your child's diagnosis, but it will transform how you experience it—and that makes all the difference in the world.

SEARCHING SO LONG

ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

For years, I felt like I was wandering in the dark. I'd tried everything I could think of to "fix" my son's autism, from mainstream therapies to treatments that, looking back, make me cringe a little. Nothing had transformed him into the "normal" child I once thought I wanted. I was exhausted, and somewhere deep inside, I knew I needed to change my approach.

The breakthrough came when I started asking different questions—better questions that led to answers that actually helped both me and my son.

After wrestling with the new definition of acceptance I had discovered, I found myself facing significant internal resistance. It wasn't easy to examine why I pushed back so hard against fully accepting my son's condition. Through this uncomfortable self-reflection, I stumbled upon an important distinction between wanting and desiring. I wanted my son to be different, but did I truly desire the consequences of that difference? Would those changes truly benefit him or just ease my own discomfort?

This honest examination revealed something I hadn't been ready to face—I hadn't fully accepted my son or his condition. I had been operating from a place of conditional love, though I would have vehemently denied it if anyone had suggested it. Through this painful realization, I discovered something that changed everything: the incredible power of asking good questions. Better questions naturally produce better answers. When I asked, "How can I cure my son?" I got very different results than when I asked, "How can I help my son have his best possible life?"

Good questions direct my practice toward joyful ends rather than frustrating dead ends. They prevent me from wasting precious time, energy, and resources on paths that lead nowhere. Most importantly, they allow me to move forward with confidence instead of second-guessing myself constantly.

Once I fully realized the power of good questioning, I began to ask myself how I could make that skill even better. I was leveraging my own success, building on what was actually working. I wanted to both clarify my thinking and empower my practice—to find questions that would open doors I didn't even know existed. So I started exploring what it means to ask truly empowering questions, and where that journey might lead. What I discovered transformed not just my approach to parenting my special needs son, but my entire life.

WHAT IS AN EMPOWERING QUESTION?

An empowering question produces an answer that breaks through limitations you weren't even aware existed. I had no idea that my initial judgment about my son's condition limited how I viewed him and how I behaved toward him. These limitations were created by incorrect answers I had accepted as fact—that autism was purely negative, that it needed to be "fixed," that my son was somehow less than he should be.

By not questioning those assumptions and judgments, I remained forever bound by them. They colored every interaction, every decision, every feeling I had about my son and his future. An empowering question also produces an answer that draws on more resources within us than we realize we have. We are all capable of far more than we think. We believe our self-imposed limitations on time, money, and energy are real when they're often just

convenient excuses. When challenged with discovery and expansion, our minds can come up with uniquely empowering ideas that we never would have considered otherwise.

The best empowering questions produce answers that drive us toward positive results we're seeking. What are you trying to gain or accomplish in your journey with your special needs child? Peace of mind? Joy? Contentedness? Happiness? It's important to remember the point of the questioning—to drive you toward what you want to achieve, not just to find any answer.

Finally, an empowering question produces an answer that makes you feel happy and energized for action. If the answer you get requires enormous self-discipline or seems like a drag, you've probably asked a poor question. Consider the difference between asking, "How can I get this parenting challenge over with quickly?" and "How can I find more joy and satisfaction in parenting my special needs child?"

Who wants to push through the first approach? But the second opens up possibilities: I can focus on the joy I feel knowing my child is having a better life. I can notice small improvements rather than focusing on what's still challenging. I can celebrate tiny victories rather than dwelling on setbacks.

Do you see the difference? One path drains energy; the other creates it. With this understanding of empowering questions, I started asking myself better questions about how I should view my son and interact with him. The answers changed everything.

WHAT QUESTIONS DID I ASK MYSELF?

Once I had a new tool in my emotional toolbox, I was eager to start using it. I meditated on what questions I was currently asking and what better, more empowering questions I could envision. This is what I came up with.

WHAT WOULD BE LOST IF HE WERE MIRACULOUSLY CURED?

This question turned everything upside down for me. I had been burdened by the hidden limitation that nothing could be good about my son's condition. But nothing is 100% bad—even his limitations provide special opportunities for pleasure and joy that I might never have experienced otherwise.

By focusing my attention away from what I judged negatively, I suddenly realized there was a lot that I genuinely liked about who he is. I began searching for the unique goodness in our situation, and what I found surprised me.

My son loves meaningful hugs. Not the quick, obligatory hugs that typical teenagers give their parents, but deep, heartfelt embraces that communicate genuine love. He's not ashamed of showing affection. He's not pulling away to gain independence. He's free to love openly and completely. He would not be comfortable with this level of physical connection if he were typical, nor would it be age-appropriate.

When I feel sad about the lack of deep conversations between us, I remind myself that for many parents, conversations with their teenage children are filled with conflict, sarcasm, or angry silences. My son has never yelled at me and told me I'm an ass—even when I've been one. He doesn't punish me by withholding affection if I displease him.

My son appreciates the help we give him, and it shows in the little things he does. We don't ask him or assign him tasks as chores—he looks for ways of contributing to the family on his own. He likes to clean up after dinner. He enjoys helping his mom with laundry and me in the yard.

I remember when he wanted to be independent and responsibly cut his own fingernails. On a couple of occasions, he cut them too short and caused himself pain. We gently reminded him that mommy and daddy would either supervise him or do it for him until he mastered the task.

You could feel that he recognized his own limitations. He felt self-conscious and embarrassed, but he knew he needed our help. Upon realizing his limitations, he asked for big hugs, told us he loved us, and looked for a way to repay our kindness. What typical teenager reacts that way when faced with their own limitations?

My son wants to live with us. Though he's gone through phases of saying he wants to live alone, he doesn't really want to be by himself. He isn't capable of taking care of himself independently, but the desire for independence is still there. He wants to be as self-sufficient as he can be, and he tries hard to show that he can do things himself.

Unfortunately, he has real limitations. He can't tie his own shoes, dress appropriately for the weather, cross the street without supervision, or understand money. But here's the beautiful part—his desire for independence doesn't stop him from accepting the help he's given. He provides us with the opportunity to serve, and in that service, we find meaning.

HOW DOES MY SON MAKE ME A BETTER PERSON?

This question led to another: How would accepting him fully make me a better person? I had to admit that rejecting him had made me, well, kind of an asshole. Could accepting him become part of my own spiritual practice?

He taught me patience. There was no point in trying to push him or rush his progress. I developed the discipline of listening to him even when he repeats the same thing over and over again.

He taught me the absolute necessity of focusing on the positive. It was natural and easy to focus on the problems—it was also draining and made me deeply unhappy. Since there was so much that I could focus on that most would consider negative, I had endless opportunities to feel awful.

I learned the discipline of focusing on what works. At first, it was simple self-preservation—I couldn't sustain the emotional drain of constantly seeing what was "wrong." Later, I recognized the value of this positive focus and built on that discipline in every area of my life.

He taught me the profound joy of serving another, and he provides me daily opportunities to practice. Not because he's lazy and asks, but because he genuinely needs the help. Through him, I learned acceptance and what it really means to love without conditions.

If my son were typical, I would not have been pushed to develop my spiritual practice in this way. I would likely have remained self-absorbed and mostly unhappy and unfulfilled. His differences forced me to grow in ways I never would have chosen but now deeply value.

I did worry—would I feel guilty about accepting him as he is? If I came to appreciate his unique autistic traits, would that somehow mean I didn't want him to progress? I was surprised that this arose as a difficulty for me. It was as if finding joy with him as he is would cause me to hold him back and keep him down. If I found joy in his helplessness, would I work to sustain it?

These were unfounded fears, but they arose with a seriousness I needed to address. For a time, I did feel selfish for wanting him just as he was. I believed he wished to be different, neurotypical like others his age.

I was mistaken. I can't feel shame when he doesn't. I can't feel shame for doing the right thing. I realized that guilt would only arise if I were making unnecessary judgments about him or myself—and that's exactly what I needed to stop doing.

SHOULDN'T I REJOICE IN HOW GREAT MY SON'S LIFE IS?

My previous questions really focused on me—my feelings, my struggles, my growth. But putting myself in his shoes opened up a series of better questions still. Once I saw how beautiful my son's life could be, and how wonderful I could make it for him, I felt nothing but excitement and joy.

I realized the simple pleasures I enjoy with him will be mine for a lifetime. It's like living with Peter Pan—there's a purity and innocence to our relationship that has a special kind of magic.

So I asked: What special joys in life does my son experience that would be lost if he were miraculously "cured"? This turned the focus away from myself and over to him. I began to understand that a cure wouldn't be all gain—there would be genuine losses too. I had been so focused on fixing him that I failed to see the ways he was not broken.

If he suddenly became neurotypical, his life wouldn't miraculously change for the better in every way. He hasn't had a lifetime of neurotypical experience to serve as a foundation. He doesn't have the social skills that develop naturally in typical children. He would always struggle to catch up and fit in, and he would become acutely aware of his own deficits. That awareness would likely make him deeply unhappy.

He would be expected to face the soul-draining grind of capitalism and the need to work to survive. His state and federal benefits would cease, but he isn't prepared for full independence due to his current developmental limitations. This is one of the major challenges faced by higher-functioning autistic adults today.

Most significantly, he would not get the same joy out of the simple pleasures he enjoys today. He wouldn't watch videos for 5-year-olds over and over again with pure delight. He wouldn't spend hours in a pool or tub just playing with funnels. He wouldn't sit quietly with daddy and just enjoy being present together without the need for words.

WHAT QUESTIONS WOULD MY SON WANT ME TO ASK?

This might be the most powerful question of all. What would I change about my son's life to make it better? He doesn't always know or realize what would make his life more enjoyable. It's a question only I could ask on his behalf, and it opened up many answers that have improved both his life and mine.

How would improving my son's life make my life better? Joy arises from the vicarious enjoyment in another's pleasures. I live in a state of joy on a daily basis, entirely due to him. I also feel great satisfaction in the quality of life I create for him.

If I were my son, what would I want my father to do? I would want my father to provide a lifestyle full of fun activities. I would want a father who gives me what I want when it's good for me and withholds it when it's not. I would want my father to anticipate my needs. I would want only love and unconditional acceptance. I would want my father to ignore my foibles and praise my good choices.

I now model my life in response to this last question. While I often fall short, meeting his needs is my highest priority. Being there for him provides my life with purpose, joy, and satisfaction in ways I never could have imagined during those early days of grief and struggle.

The right questions led me to the right answers—answers that have transformed our lives completely. Maybe they can do the same for you.

HE AIN'T HEAVY

GRATITUDE AND THANKFULNESS PRACTICE

At the time of this writing, my primary spiritual practice focuses on feelings of thankfulness for my blessings and enjoyments. This wasn't something that happened by accident—I chose this practice intentionally after years of struggling with darker emotions.

I've found it incredibly helpful to have a primary practice to combat my most difficult emotional habits. For me, gratitude training works wonders because I'm naturally prone to dismiss joy and instead focus on what's lacking in my life. This isn't unique to me—it's a common bad habit among all of us. Our minds, if left untrained and undisciplined, naturally gravitate toward what we don't have and what we think we want.

When I'm not watching my thoughts and actively engaging in gratitude practice, my mood gradually sours. Small irritations that I would normally brush off become major annoyances. Problems seem bigger, and pleasures seem smaller. I become more easily disturbed by life's inevitable challenges.

I still watch my mind constantly and apply the emotional opponents I've described throughout this book when needed. But applying these opponents is reactionary—it's putting out fires rather than preventing them in the first place. For me, a primary practice is something I engage in 24/7, not just when I'm struggling.

The beautiful thing about consistent practice is that eventually it becomes habituated. What once required intense focus and mental discipline slowly transforms into a natural way of being. I went through that cycle with the practice of exchanging myself with my special needs son. After consciously engaging in this practice for many months, I no longer needed to remind myself of its importance. I just did it all the time, as naturally as breathing.

WHAT IS GRATITUDE TRAINING?

At its core, gratitude training means being thankful for whatever I have. Even in the worst circumstances, I can find ways to interpret events as good—or at least, find something good within them. There's that old saying: "I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet." This doesn't mean denying or negating the negative aspects of a situation. Rather, it means consciously choosing to focus my attention, and therefore my emotions, on something positive and uplifting.

This is because our thoughts determine our feelings, and our feelings control our moods. It's a simple chain reaction with profound implications for our quality of life.

Finding the positive, no matter how small, is a mental discipline—like building a muscle. When I engage in this practice, my mood improves and I feel happier.

Always and every time.

Sometimes my mind resists, claiming I have more important things to worry about. But that's precisely why it's called a discipline—it's something you do even when you don't want to.

This isn't just positive thinking or wishful daydreaming. You can easily lose yourself in delusion and fantasy that way.

If I imagined my son would be completely cured and live a "normal" life, that would be a pleasant but ultimately harmful delusion. Instead, gratitude practice is about interpreting reality based on facts.

My son will always be autistic, and there is much good in that for him and our family. The practice helps me see and appreciate that good.

Cultivating an Optimistic Disposition

As part of my gratitude practice, I intentionally cultivate the belief that events will turn out in ways that promote my happiness and well-being. It's the classic "glass half full" perspective. Since this is an interpretation of events, not an objective evaluation, it's entirely possible for anyone to achieve it.

Even when things occur that I don't want to happen, I've learned to suspend judgment and look for what's positive. It's always there if you look for it. This entire book is about convincing you that your special needs child is a blessing and not a curse, because I truly believe that to be the case.

I've come to believe that optimism is our natural state, while pessimism is learned. People are born hopeful and expectant. However, since we also naturally focus on lack and negative outcomes, our natural optimism gets subdued over time.

I used to think I was naturally pessimistic, but I came to realize my pessimism was entirely due to my habits of thought. Our natural optimism gets overridden by frequent negative interpretations of events. Over time, optimism fades and pessimism takes over. Some people mistakenly call this "wisdom that comes from experience," but it's not wisdom at all. It's ignorance born of undisciplined negative thinking.

Gratitude Overcomes Dissatisfaction

Gratitude is also what I call an emotional opponent—a mental discipline I engage in whenever some event disturbs my peace of mind. Gratitude training is generally different because it's not intended to overcome some specific disturbing occurrence. But if something does deeply disturb me, I'll suspend my judgment until I can find some good in it to serve as an opposing emotional force.

I practice gratitude primarily to overcome the unsatisfactoriness of daily life. In Buddhist teachings, this concept is often described as "overcoming suffering," but that's not completely accurate. Overcoming overt suffering and pain is part of the Buddha's teaching, but what he was describing was more subtle and nuanced.

The Buddha noticed that life experience becomes imbued with a permanent sense of dissatisfaction. It isn't necessarily overtly painful or intense suffering—it's a general mood or sense that life isn't all that great. In short, life becomes boring, and all experiences become unsatisfying, even intensely pleasurable ones.

He realized this unsatisfactoriness was rooted in our sense of self, our endless desire, and our endless quest to find momentary satisfaction. Ask any addict, and they will lament the fact that pleasure fades. Satisfaction never lasts. We are constantly driven by our dissatisfaction to find the next pleasure, the next resource, the next momentary satisfaction that quickly fades.

I practice gratitude as an opponent to these feelings of unsatisfactoriness that creep into daily life. It brings me back to appreciation for what's here, now.

ENDLESS PROBLEM-SOLVING

One of the biggest challenges to maintaining gratitude is our tendency to get stuck in problem-solving mode. I've learned to address "problems" only on an as-needed basis rather than letting them consume my thoughts constantly.

I try to focus on the present rather than worry about the future. Eckhart Tolle's "The Power of Now" addresses this key feature of the worrying mind. As Tolle often asks, "What problem do you have at this moment?" The answer is nearly always "none." I'm only imagining future problems I may have to deal with at some point. Committing to solving problems only on an "as needed" basis eliminates a lot of worry.

This doesn't mean eliminating all thoughts of the future. That wouldn't be desirable or practical. All complex tasks require future thinking and planning. I need to plan for retirement. I need to exercise for future health. Setting aside specific time to address future events is necessary and desirable. However, I minimize the time and effort spent dealing with those events and circumstances that are not immediate and not what I want.

I completely ignore negative judgments when they're not immediately useful for decision-making. This takes some faith—people worry that if they don't obsess over problems, they won't solve them. Or they'll make poor decisions because they haven't thought everything through.

This hamster wheel feeling is sometimes called the Red Queen effect—running faster and faster just to stay in place. You don't need to burn endless energy solving perceived problems just to stay where you are. The endless focus on problems is not helpful. In fact, it's the root of all worry and anxiety.

Once you realize you're on a hamster wheel—expending enormous effort while making no progress—the only rational choice is to get off. I encourage you to contemplate that fact the next time you find yourself deep in worry.

A certain amount of rumination is necessary, but it's consistently overdone by a large factor. When excessive, this becomes just a rationalization for wasted time and energy.

PRACTICING GRATITUDE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

I've found it most effective to engage in gratitude practice whenever my mind is not needed for some other activity. Think about the quality of your life when you're alone with your thoughts. I remember watching Star Wars and asking myself what Darth Vader thought about when traveling alone in his ship for hours on a mission. Yoda would have been happy and at peace. Vader would have been angry and tormented.

Do you just let your mind wander aimlessly? If you do, your mind will invariably turn to your problems and focus on your upsets. That will sour your mood faster than anything else.

When you're alone with your thoughts, try focusing on gratitude instead. When I'm alone with my thoughts, which happens quite often being an introvert, I focus on gratitude. It transforms what could be anxious or gloomy solitude into peaceful contemplation. Even during mindless entertainment, spend a moment being grateful for the opportunity to enjoy it. I don't allow myself much mindless entertainment—if I did, I would never have written this book. But when I do indulge, I'm aware of my choice, and I'm thankful I have the opportunity.

One practice I've found especially powerful is asking myself, "What wonderful new things will I experience today?" I try to ask this question each time I leave my house, and I'm continually amazed at what I find. Questions

like this set your mental radar to look for items to be thankful for, even when your conscious mind is engaged in other activities. It's setting your intention on finding something new and wonderful in each day.

I found gratitude practice to be a great replacement for extraneous thoughts about myself. I used to focus exclusively on my own life circumstances and perceived problems—losing sleep over circumstances, worrying about potential outcomes. Me, me, me, all the time. I never actually solved many problems that way, but that didn't stop me from trying. Even on those rare occasions when my obsessive focus did change my life circumstances for the better, I simply replaced the old problem with a new one. Problem-solving can become a mental sickness from which you're never cured except by abandoning the habit itself.

Whatever you think about generates the feelings that determine your experience of daily life. If you think about what brings you joy and happiness, that becomes your experience. If you think about your problems and what you lack, that becomes your experience instead. With continuing practice, the happiness resulting from a focus on gratitude becomes the dominant state of mind. Once happiness becomes the norm, that state is maintained by applying emotional opponents when something disturbs your peace.

GRATITUDE TRAINING WITH YOUR CHILD

Having a special needs child was an event that forced me to examine my mind's tendency to focus on the negative. At first, all my judgments about having a special needs child were negative. Finding a cure became an obsessive thought pattern full of worry and suffering.

I didn't want to focus on anything positive because I believed it would distract me from finding a cure or doing what's best for my son. But these thoughts didn't help me or my son, and they won't help you or your child. The non-stop negative judgment toward your child becomes a big part of the problem itself. Even from the beginning, I encourage you to seek ways to train in gratitude. If I had it to do over again, I would have kept my focus on the positive aspects of our situation. Even now, my remorse over this mistake serves as motivation to remain positive moving forward.

Your child is alive. Your child will love you and appreciate the ways you fulfill their special needs. Your child will grow to experience a special environment of love and acceptance—because you will make that happen. Your child will spur your spiritual growth in ways you cannot yet imagine. You'll develop deeper compassion, acceptance, and patience than you thought possible. You will become a happier, more fulfilled, better person because of your child. These aren't empty platitudes—I've lived this transformation, and I've seen it in other parents too.

When we stop seeing our special needs children as burdens and start recognizing them as gifts that enrich our lives in unique ways, everything changes. Gratitude becomes not just a practice but a way of life—one that allows both you and your child to thrive despite the challenges you face together.

JUST THE WAY YOU ARE

EXCHANGE YOURSELF WITH YOUR CHILD

Exchanging myself with my son is both a practice and a way of life. My relationship with him blossomed when I started putting myself in his shoes, imagining the world through his eyes. This simple shift changed everything for both of us.

When my son was 17, we took a vacation together—just the two of us—for nine days straight. My wife stayed home, and he and I traveled out of state. This trip became one of the most transformative experiences of my life. I used those nine days as an experiment in complete devotion to his needs and pleasures. Being away from home and isolated from our usual routines gave me the perfect opportunity. No distractions, no work calls, no household chores—just us. We stayed at a recreation area with countless activities, and I made a decision that would alter my approach to parenting forever: I would spend the entire vacation imagining what I would want if I were him, then acting on those impulses.

For those nine days, I didn't allow myself to even ask the question, "What do I want to do today?" Instead, I remained completely focused on him. I put myself in his mind, imagined his desires, and acted on them without hesitation. When we woke up each morning, I'd think, "If I were him, what would make me happiest today?" Then we'd do exactly that.

I won't pretend it was effortless. My mind resisted for the first few days. That little voice kept popping up: "But what about what you want?" I gently pushed those thoughts aside and kept focused on his happiness. By the fourth day, something magical happened—it started to feel natural. I noticed two things happening simultaneously: the joy I obtained vicariously through him increased dramatically, and the pleasure he got from our activities multiplied.

By immersing myself so completely in this practice, I came to fully understand and appreciate its power. It was genuinely one of the best vacations and most meaningful experiences of my life. There was a freedom in letting go of my own preferences that I never expected to find.

Today, I engage in this practice all the time, though not with the same degree of selflessness as during that vacation. I've developed a deep understanding of what it takes to put his interests ahead of my own. Most of our daily activities now are things we both enjoy, and we've found a nice balance that honors both our needs.

PUT YOURSELF IN YOUR CHILD'S SHOES

Exchanging self with others means thinking and acting in the selfish interest of another person. It sounds counterintuitive—acting selfishly for someone else—but that's exactly what makes it powerful. Try practicing it with your special needs child. Ask yourself what's important to them without regard to what's important to you.

Of course, you'll need to apply your own wisdom about what's right and wrong and what's truly best for your child. But the key difference is that you don't weigh their interests against yours. You consider only what they want in your decision-making. The result is that you often end up doing things you wouldn't choose for yourself because it's what they want to do and what's best for them.

The surprising part? It doesn't feel like a sacrifice. When you truly exchange yourself with your child, their joy becomes your joy.

Selflessness is not martyrdom. Many people develop personalities as people-pleasers, and there's certainly nothing wrong with wanting to please others. But martyrs sacrifice themselves to gain sympathy. Martyrdom in personal relationships becomes a source of power and a means to control others. It's selfishness in disguise.

True selflessness means giving to another without regard to personal gain—even if that gain is merely recognition from others. One reason I chose to write this book anonymously is to prevent any possibility of martyrdom or accusations of seeking praise.

This practice goes beyond empathy. Empathy is imagining what another feels and giving weight to those feelings when making decisions. But you can imagine how someone feels, consider it important, and yet act selfishly anyway. People excel at finding justifications for putting their own interests over others' wants.

Many of our social concepts work to justify selfishness. Our entire economic system revolves around the idea that selfish actors can somehow produce good for the many. Hollywood produces movies like "Wall Street" where characters declare that "greed is good." Our religious institutions often focus on personal salvation first and foremost. In this context, acting selflessly for others is sometimes considered weak or undesirable.

Considering someone's feelings isn't the same as acting on those feelings as if they were your own. That's the difference that matters.

Remember the phrase "love your neighbor as yourself"? This is widely misinterpreted as a general instruction on being a good person. But it's actually an instruction to exchange yourself with others—to love them exactly as you would love yourself. To treasure their desires as if they were your own. To act in their best interest, and even in their selfish interest, within reason.

THE JOY OF SELFLESSNESS

Exchanging self with others is the source of much joy. Taking pleasure in the happiness and accomplishments of others creates a special kind of contentment. Being responsible for the happiness of others is deeply gratifying. Bringing others pleasure becomes an endless source of satisfaction.

I've found this practice to be one of the greatest rewards for raising a special needs child. When I focus on creating happiness for my son, I discover happiness for myself that I never would have found otherwise.

TREASURING YOUR CHILD INSTEAD OF YOURSELF

These concepts provide motivation for practice. Treasuring others over yourself fulfills both your wishes and theirs. This practice is essential to raising a special needs child as they often can't take care of themselves the way typically developing children can.

My son can't take care of himself in the ways most people can. He doesn't have sophisticated or underhanded interpersonal strategies for getting what he wants from others. He lies so rarely, and does it so transparently, that my wife and I find it amusing when he makes the attempt. He occasionally tries to conceal behaviors he thinks we don't want him to do, like wasting toilet paper, but his efforts are clumsy and unsophisticated. We always catch him.

He doesn't understand money, so he can't bribe people. Any form of manipulation you can think of is beyond his abilities. Without these typical foibles of human interaction, he can only get what he wants by asking for it directly and hoping the answer is yes. Since the only way my son can get what he wants is by asking us or by us

anticipating his needs, his quality of life completely depends on our attention and favorable treatment. This is both a responsibility and an opportunity. Fulfilling this responsibility can either be a duty we dread or an opportunity for joy.

We chose joy. And in choosing joy, we fulfill our wishes for a happy life as well as his.

PROTECTION FROM SUFFERING

Treasuring others protects them and you from suffering. If you're focused on your own suffering, then you are suffering. If others are suffering and you notice it, you'll feel compassion—a virtuous feeling. Your compassion will motivate you to relieve their suffering, benefiting both of you.

Prior to making my son the primary focus of my life, I was a typical struggling man trying to advance my career, elevate my status, and make more money. In that respect, I was completely ordinary, following the same script as everyone else. Since I was totally focused on my career, my standing, and my income, I was constantly upset by perceived failures. I wasn't happy because I remained focused on myself, what I lacked, and my problems. Some might think I must have been a loser, so devoting my life to my son was an easy choice. Others might assume I must have been successful to have the means to stop worrying about those things and take working with my son as my primary purpose. Whatever you might think probably reflects where you are in life rather than where I was when I made the change.

Once I started focusing on my son instead of myself, my entire life improved dramatically. I suddenly didn't have very many problems. I still had business affairs to tend to and job tasks to perform, but they became merely items on my to-do list rather than huge problems that needed solving. I didn't have troubling thoughts about who I was, who I was supposed to be, or who others thought I was. When I stopped caring about my identity, at least 50% of my thinking simply evaporated. I was astonished by how much time I'd spent thinking about myself. My stress level declined by 80% or more. Without worries about my problems and concerns over my status, the sources of my stress disappeared. Plus, I replaced those thoughts with thoughts about my family, the things I was thankful for, and how I could make my son's life even better, so my mood naturally elevated.

Not surprisingly, when I started focusing on my son, his life improved too. Whatever you give attention to will bloom. Your attention is like water and fertilizer for the seeds you've planted in your mind. If you attend to your weeds, your weeds of disturbance will grow vigorously. If you attend to your special needs child, your child will blossom.

THE JOY OF TREASURING OTHERS

Treasuring others brings joy to your life. Joy is the pleasure and satisfaction you gain vicariously through others. Treasuring their happiness and working toward it brings you joy in return. This is the true reward for raising a special needs child.

If I didn't believe this were true, I wouldn't have bothered to write this book. I didn't write it for money or fame. If the best I could do in my own life was to find a way to grin and bear it through my challenging circumstances, I wouldn't have a message worth sharing. Treasuring my son has made all the difference in my life, and I believe it can do the same for you.

GIVING AND YOUR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

Special needs children provide natural opportunities for giving. They are often helpless and need assistance. They are your family, so you should be naturally inclined to help them. Giving to your special needs child should become central to your daily life. Much of my motivation to complete this book was an extension of the giving I practice with my son—giving love, attention, special experiences, travel, entertainment. It's all good, and it all matters.

Generosity can be learned and cultivated, even in special needs children. My son understands and practices generosity. He will offer food and other items to us to please us. We've cultivated and rewarded this behavior over many years. He does it reflexively now, and he gains pleasure in the giving. He always surprises me when he offers something I know he really wants for himself.

LOVE AND YOUR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

What is Love? For a topic that is so widely discussed, you would think there was a universally accepted definition of love. There isn't.

Is love a thing? Is love a feeling? Is love an action? The dictionary defines love as "an intense feeling of deep affection." Most people define love as a feeling, and many confuse their feelings of attachment for love. People often believe love is a random feeling, a passion outside their control.

There's a kernel of truth here—the conditions and characteristics of people that create an initial spark of attraction are mysterious. But the feeling of love, the deep affection for others, can be cultivated and enhanced. People often make life decisions based on the intensity of the feeling of love. Most choose life partners this way. It's a good start, but as the high divorce rate proves, it isn't the best or most important criteria.

The intensity of the feelings of love ebbs and flows. An old saying in chivalry dictates that love is either increasing or decreasing but never in a steady state. Any emotion will change in intensity over time; love is not unique in this regard. The problem arises when people make major life decisions based on these changes. The feeling is a critical part of love, but it's only a part. Love is supported by action.

The Bible has a wonderful description of love based on actions rather than feelings: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." This focuses attention on the actions associated with the feeling.

Love is patient, accepting people as they are with no resistance. Love is kind, expressing feelings of warmth and performing acts of service. Love shows no envy, does not express or feel jealousy. Love doesn't boast, isn't proud, doesn't feel superiority over others. Love doesn't dishonor, doesn't act in ways that harm others. Love isn't self-seeking; it puts the interests of others over the self. Love doesn't get angry or hold resentments.

In Tibetan Buddhism, love is described as "a virtuous mind that creates only peace and happiness." Buddhists define love by going back to the source—the thoughts in your head. The mind is the forerunner of all things. The thoughts you cultivate generate feelings. When you cultivate thoughts of love, your heart responds with love, peace, and happiness. When positive thoughts support a joyous heart, the outward manifestation becomes acts of kindness.

My favorite definition comes from Wikipedia: "The unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another." As a parent of a special needs child, my duty is to provide unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for my son. This mindset informs my feelings, which motivates my actions.

Love as Feeling and Activity

Love is both a feeling and an activity. The feeling of intense affection can be natural and familial, or it can be cultivated. In meditation, you can extend love from family to friends and eventually to others. One of the most powerful meditations for overcoming resentments and practicing forgiveness is to meditate on love for your enemies. It is one of the most difficult and most rewarding meditations I practice—at least it used to be. I've released the enemies from the prison in my heart.

The feeling inspires action. Virtue springs from love—giving, forgiving, accepting. The actions, in turn, generate more feelings, creating a virtuous circle where feeling drives action that increases feeling. Kindness is the cultivated state where loving feelings and actions intertwine. Cultivating a mind of love takes practice. Love is more than a feeling; it's a feeling supported by action. Love grows when you hold positive thoughts in your mind and heart. Love diminishes when you cultivate thoughts of anger, resentment, and hatred. Love grows when you give, forgive, and practice acceptance. Love grows when you act out of kindness and friendliness toward others.

Loving a Special Needs Child

Feeling affectionate love for a special needs child can sometimes be easier than for others. When someone is helpless, compassion arises naturally. When it's your child, this tendency is even stronger. When the child doesn't have the desire or capacity for competition, many barriers to love simply don't exist. Any barriers to feeling affectionate love are within you. Do you view your child as broken or unworthy? As unruly or difficult to manage? As demanding and needy? Abandon these thoughts, and affectionate love will strongly arise.

I practice a Buddhist meditation called lovingkindness. The meditation starts by bringing to mind a person who generates strong feelings of affectionate love. Once you generate the feeling, you bring others into your heart and try to sustain those feelings by wishing them love. I always start this meditation by thinking about my son. He never provides any resistance or reasons not to love him. My feelings of affectionate love for my son are pure and untainted by complications.

Manifesting Kindness as a Way of Life

My life has been completely transformed by my special needs son. He has been the focus of my spiritual practice for many years. At first, I had to form key mental disciplines to stop myself from becoming depressed. Later, I came to appreciate the benefits these disciplines provided. This encouraged me to explore and experiment with other disciplines to solve other mental and emotional problems. Through it all, there was my son—my beacon of hope, my reason for putting in all the work. I was determined to make his life as wonderful, meaningful, and joyous as it could be. As my inner and outer worlds changed, he blossomed. Over time, I came to understand more deeply what it means to live a good life.

Inwardly, a good life is characterized by an uplifting mood with continuous feelings of joy and happiness, with limited disturbances to this emotional state. Achieving this state of being is the purpose of all spiritual practice. It

takes mental discipline to enter this state and to fend off the disturbances that take you out of it. But if you achieve this state of mind, how does it manifest in the world?

Outwardly, a good life is characterized by a kind disposition, emotional stability, and actions that benefit others. Training with gratitude or thankfulness elevates your mood and inclines you toward acts of kindness. The diminishment of self-importance and the practice of moral discipline makes you worthy of friendship. Humility makes you approachable and likable. Refraining from judgments about people and events makes you more accepting of others and reduces conflicts.

Remembering impermanence reduces your attachments and makes your behavior toward others more respectful and less manipulative. Practicing giving endears you to others because you focus on bringing them joy and happiness. Practicing rejoicing makes other people happy and makes them more inclined to share their joys with you, improving the quality of all your relationships.

Practicing acceptance eliminates anger and allows others to be happy in your presence without concern that they must defend themselves. Practicing forgiveness helps people know that if they make a mistake, you will still be kind toward them, making them more comfortable in relationship with you. Practicing compassion demonstrates that you have empathy and genuine concern for another's well-being, allowing them to feel completely safe in your company.

Practicing love makes people feel special and increases their desire to reciprocate good feelings and kind actions. In short, practicing all these disciplines makes you a person others strongly want to be around. You exude positivity, acceptance, and love, you give generously, and you act in ways that bring others joy and happiness.

Who wouldn't want that?

DAILY LIFE WITH KINDNESS

When you embrace the mental disciplines I've described, you no longer spend most of your time and energy focusing on your personal problems. Rather than experiencing a lower quality of life from lack of attention to your perceived problems, you experience a higher quality of life because what you previously considered problems simply evaporate. You still do what's needed when it's needed, but you do it without worry. Over time, the number of problems you experience in daily life falls to near zero.

In place of problems, your mind gravitates toward joyous things: thankfulness for all you have and your enjoyments, satisfaction in the joy you bring others, ways to give more to others to bring them joy and happiness, and thankfulness for the opportunities you have to make a difference. Your mind rests in a quiet peace permeated by the bliss of simply being alive.

Your mind will still get caught up in your enjoyments or passions. I spent many, many hours enjoying writing this book. But even when your mind is engaged in other activities, there remains a background blissful feeling that never leaves you. This is the gift that raising my special needs son has given me—a path to genuine happiness that I might never have discovered otherwise.

WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD

MY SPECIAL SON'S SPECIAL WORLD

I've kept this chapter deliberately short. Not because there isn't more to say, but because I wanted to give you just a glimpse into our world. I'm not sharing this for comparison or to suggest we've figured out some magical formula. I simply want to show you that a joyous life with a special needs child isn't just a distant dream—it's genuinely possible.

This chapter isn't about our success story; it's about what's possible for you and your family.

As you might imagine, we've created a unique environment for our son—a special world tailored to who he is, not who we once thought he might be. James is an only child, and we don't have other children who are neurotypical. This has allowed us to shape our entire household around his needs without the complex balancing act many families face.

We absolutely dote on him, but here's something fascinating I've discovered: because he isn't neurotypical, we don't actually "spoil" him in the traditional sense. The concept of being "spoiled" doesn't really apply to James. He doesn't have the social skills or desire to manipulate us to his advantage. When we shower him with love and attention, he simply absorbs it gratefully, without developing the entitled attitude parents often worry about with typical children.

PRINCE JAMES: HOW MAY WE SERVE YOU?

In our home, James is royalty—and we're happy to be his loyal subjects. We often playfully bow and ask, "How may we serve you today, Prince James?" He giggles every time, even though he's heard it a thousand times before. This little ritual isn't just fun; it communicates something profound to him: in this household, his needs matter. His happiness matters. He matters.

I've seen the way his eyes light up when we honor his preferences and celebrate his unique way of being in the world. Far from creating a demanding tyrant, this approach has helped him feel secure and valued exactly as he is.

LOVE BOMBING: YOU CAN'T GIVE TOO MUCH

One beautiful discovery we've made is that a special needs child simply can't be spoiled with too much love and attention. Unlike typically developing children who might leverage affection to manipulate, James simply drinks it all in and genuinely appreciates the effort.

We "love bomb" him daily—smothering him with hugs, praise, encouragement, and undivided attention. Rather than creating problems, this consistent shower of affection has helped him blossom and feel safe exploring his world. When his emotional cup is consistently full, he has more capacity to handle life's challenges. I remember worrying early on that we might be offering too much support or coddling him. Those fears dissolved when I saw how each expression of love seemed to strengthen him rather than weaken him. The more secure he felt in our love, the more confident he became in navigating his world.

Listening Discipline: Every Word Matters

Despite the repetition and sometimes lack of new content in what James says, I've developed what I call "listening discipline"—I listen and react appropriately to every single word. This isn't always easy. Sometimes he'll tell me the same story about a video game character for the fifth time in a day, or repeat a question I've already answered multiple times. But I've made the conscious choice to engage fully each time.

What surprised me was discovering that he sometimes deliberately says the wrong thing just to see if I'm really listening. He'll mix up a detail in a familiar story or use an incorrect word, then watch my face closely for a reaction. When I catch these little tests and respond appropriately, a smile spreads across his face. He knows he's truly being heard, and it makes him feel valued and important in a world that often overlooks children like him. This listening discipline has created a deep bond between us. He trusts that his voice matters in our home, even when the outside world might not always offer him the same courtesy.

It's Always Mommy's and Daddy's Fault

We discovered early on that autistic children often struggle with impulse control. They typically don't have that internal voice—what some might call a meta persona—capable of exercising restraint in the moment. If I'm being honest, sometimes I don't either. We all have our moments.

So we made a decision that dramatically changed our family dynamic: no matter what goes wrong, we take the blame. The cup spills? "Oh, I should have put it farther from the edge." A favorite toy breaks? "We should have found a sturdier one."

We realized that getting angry at James doesn't change his behavior—it just doesn't work that way with his neurological wiring. What it does produce is debilitating anxiety that simply isn't worth the price. By shouldering the blame ourselves, we've created a home where he doesn't live in fear of making mistakes or losing our love. This approach has given him the emotional safety to try new things without paralyzing fear of failure. The peace in our home is worth far more than being "right" about whose fault something was.

James's Daily Reality

What does daily life look like for James? It starts with wake-up cuddles with his momma. These aren't quick hugs—they're extended moments of connection that ease him into the day. Then come tight hugs with daddy (he prefers pressure-filled embraces that help regulate his sensory system). Before we all head off in different directions, we gather for our "team hug" ritual to start the day properly aligned.

When he returns from school, "Hugs, I'm home!" is the announcement that echoes through our house. These aren't formalities; they're essential touchpoints that help him feel grounded and connected throughout the day. Physical activity is non-negotiable in our world—both for his body and his mind. We've found that regular exercise dramatically improves his focus and emotional regulation. Some days it's jumping on the trampoline, other days it's swimming or bike riding. We follow his lead on what feels good that day.

Mario Kart competitions have become a family institution. I used to let him win, but those days are long gone—he legitimately beats me now, and his victory dances are epic. These games give us a shared language and inside jokes that bridge the communication gaps we sometimes face.

We also honor what he calls "chillin' by choice"—his term for needing downtime alone. We've learned to recognize when sensory overload is building and respect his need to retreat into his personal space. This isn't rejection; it's self-regulation, and we celebrate his ability to recognize and communicate his needs.

JAMES'S SPECIAL PLEASURES

Every child has things that light them up from the inside, and James is no different. For him, it's Disneyland—a place where the predictable routines, visual stimulation, and familiar characters create the perfect environment. We had passes for about 15 years, and he has been there more than 300 times!

Theme parks and water parks rank high on his list of favorites too. The sensory experiences—the rushing water, the feeling of weightlessness, the controlled thrills—seem to organize his nervous system in ways nothing else can. We save all year for these trips, not seeing them as luxuries but as essential experiences that bring him immeasurable joy. The zoo provides another form of therapy. Watching animals behave according to their natures seems to resonate deeply with him.

Day trips, restaurant outings, and animated films round out his list of special pleasures. We've learned to plan these experiences not as occasional treats but as regular parts of his life—fuel for his spirit that helps him navigate the more challenging aspects of his world.

MAKING HIS LIFE EVEN BETTER

"What can we do to make his life even better?" It's a question I ask myself each morning as I watch him sleep. Even after years of practice, I still come up with new ideas. Sometimes they're simple adjustments—a new sensory tool, a different bedtime routine. Other times they're bigger shifts in how we structure our home or engage with his education.

This question keeps me from becoming complacent or resigned. It reminds me that we're always evolving in our understanding of James and how to support him. There's always room for more joy, more connection, more growth—not despite his autism, but alongside it.

WHAT WORLD CAN YOU CREATE FOR YOUR CHILD?

Now I turn this question to you: What kind of wonderful world can you create for your child? It won't look exactly like ours—it shouldn't. Your child is uniquely themselves, with their own preferences, challenges, and sources of joy. The world you create will be as distinct as they are.

Your journey may feel overwhelming right now. You might be thinking, "I'm just trying to get through today—how can I possibly create a 'wonderful world'?" I've been there. Start small. Look for one moment of connection today. Find one thing that brings a smile. Build from there.

The wonderful world we've created for James didn't happen overnight. It evolved through thousands of tiny choices, failed experiments, surprising discoveries, and persistent love. Your wonderful world will unfold the same way—imperfectly, gradually, and beautifully.

Remember that the most meaningful elements of this special world aren't expensive therapies or elaborate accommodations. They're the everyday moments of acceptance, the consistent message that your child is loved exactly as they are, and the unwavering belief in their value as a human being.

This is the heart of what makes a world wonderful for any child, but especially for our extraordinary ones who experience life differently. In creating this world for them, we often discover something unexpected—it becomes a wonderful world for us too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author is a retired real estate fund manager who now spends his time entertaining and assisting his son, and writing to express a lifetime of pent up ideas.

His son stands as his world, the center of all things. A young man with autism, this remarkable soul revealed to the author the man he was meant to become. As the son grew taller, the father grew deeper, shedding the selfishness and vanity that once gripped him. The son became the heart of his spiritual practice, the reason he loves, sees beyond himself.

Without this child, he would still chase hollow things. His son gave him purpose, showed him what it means to live for someone else. The care required isn't a hardship or burden to bear—it's a blessing, rare and extraordinary. The author shares a joy with his son that others rarely know, and for that, he owes his child everything. This young man inspires him, transforms him, and gives his life meaning.