

Volume 3, Issue 1
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BECOMING YOUR BEST



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Stories Of Hope And Encouragement

Becoming Your Best Newsletter

Greetings,

Stephen R. Covey, in his book The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, refers to human nature as being four dimensional. He identifies the four dimensions as body, mind, heart, and spirit. It requires a focus of time and energy in each of these dimensions to live a balanced life that produces a sense of well being and wholeness.

Our first article this month is written by John B. Thomas, who has served as the former Consultant for Autism with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and as the Consultant for training with the Autism Society of North Carolina.

John's article provides a synopsis of discussion that occurred at the recent Faith Outreach Initiative Conference on the issue of "Autism in the Congregation." This article provides some good "food for thought" when considering children with disabilities participating in congregational settings.

Our second article this month is one for the "heart." Although the story is not verified and the author is unknown, it is still one of those stories that you love to read. It helps to remind us of the important things in life that make a difference.

Coming up in future issues we will be adding a new feature which will be focused on positive, practical practices that anyone can incorporate in addressing the four dimensions of human nature. This new feature will be called "Quest to Becoming Your Best" and will provide some of the foundational basics that will help make a difference in your life and the lives of those you encounter on a daily basis.

Submit your inspirational stories to: stories@becomingyourbest.com.

Subscribe to our FREE newsletter: newsletter@becomingyourbest.com.

[BECOME A FAN ON FACEBOOK AT BECOMING YOUR BEST.](#)

Mission:

We are dedicated to presenting inspiring stories of hope and encouragement about individuals with disabilities.

These stories of success are meant to provide support and the keys to "Becoming Your Best!"

Thank you for your stories and your support!

George M. Graham Jr.

"OUR HOUSES OF PRAYER ARE INCOMPLETE IF OUR ENTIRE COMMUNITY IS NOT PRESENT." - JOHN B. THOMAS

On January 20, 2012, the Faith Outreach Initiative Conference was held in Durham, NC to address the issue of "Autism in the Congregation." Rabbi Bradley Artson shared his journey of faith and family. A group of parents and religious leaders contributed their experiences. This article is a personal synopsis of the discussion.



John B. Thomas, Independent Educational Consultant.

One way to look at our community is that there are those of us with special needs and those without special needs. None of us leaves the world without at some point having special needs. How are we creating a world where those with special needs are fully embraced by the community? Those of us who are 'temporarily able' have the challenge of seeing the person, not the need.

A woman with a specific disability stated, "I have needs. I do not have special needs. They are the same needs that you have." Living the premise that all people are people of God is one of our greatest spiritual challenges. Actually treating all people as people of God is a challenge. It is not giving lip service and going on about life. Our goal of real acceptance must be broader than some 'duty to volunteerism.'

Rabbi Bradley Artson told a story of his teenage son, Jacob. A member of his synagogue asked to perform a service project with his son. When the period of time allotted was up, the person left, virtually in mid-conversation. Jacob was struck by this exit. Jacob is a young man who communicates through writing; he does not speak. He noted soon after the event that he did not want to be part of a service project.

There is another story that describes the frustration that many with "special needs" feel in interacting with the church. Alex first attended Sunday School at age 2. Being overwhelmed by the social environment, he spent each Sunday sitting in the rocking boat in the class. This became the place in which he felt safe. Thus, he kept this up until age 4 when the Sunday School teachers said he was too old and needed not to sit in the boat any longer. He then went to another Sunday School class. The teacher told his mother that they would color that day. His mother informed the teacher that Alex was not going to color. When Alex's mother returned to pick up Alex, the teacher held up a waded heap of ripped paper and with a scornful look and said, "Look at what your son did." His mother said, "I guess he did not color." Alex did not go back to this class.

For several years, Alex went to a Sunday School class of older retired men. Here he found acceptance, positive regard and a chance to interact. When asked by other church members why he went to a class of old men, he stated, "I go because they are nice to me." The response from several was "I think the people in your age class are very nice." Alex said, "No, they aren't. At least they aren't to me." Did that community of retired men recognize and accept unique needs? Many of them inevitably had their own needs. Alex does not go to church anymore at age 27. Did he have the opportunities for consistent engagement and acceptance? Did he experience unconditional love?



Isaiah's message—My house will be a house of worship for all people.

"OUR HOUSES OF PRAYER ARE INCOMPLETE..." - CONTINUED

Our standards for worship, our standards for interaction at church may not fit the needs of some. We create a quiet and orderly environment for worship and reflection. Though those standards are valuable, we should consistently evaluate if they are more important than acceptance. Let's pose some questions that each of us should consider repeatedly. Do our present standards prevent us from embracing the entire community? Is our structure for church programs on Sunday flexible enough to make unique children accepted and happy as possible? What adjustments do we need to help our volunteer teachers? "You cannot be somewhat inclusive. Either you are or you are not." – Rabbi Artson.

The faith community is about experiencing transformation. Children with special needs can speed our transformation as a people of God. Are we cheating our own transformation by not interacting with those with different needs, with those with all needs?

We can continue our journey to expand our community by asking what each family needs and what families need who are close by, yet not involved. I have heard so many times of families who participate less in specific church activities because the child with special needs cannot participate successfully. How do we prevent that moving away? A mother of a young adult with an autism spectrum disorder who is also the wife of a local pastor stated, "I don't think I could have stayed at church with my son at a young age if I were not the spouse of the pastor and had to stay." From so many parents, I hear "I don't want my child to hate going to church."

How do we change this? We identify what makes the child happy and included. We listen to the parents and find activities that embrace the whole family. How do we make church activities fit the needs of each person? How do we accept the reactions of the person, even when they seem disruptive? How do we understand and respond with understanding, not judgment or rejection? Can we find ways to increase the frequency of interactions, of exchanges? How do we create a community that embraces those who have differences in communication? Are we slighting ourselves by not seeing how all are created in God's image?

Specifically, the concept of God is sometimes elusive and mysterious for all of us. For an individual with autism who locks on to concrete details to make sense of the world, the concept can be even more elusive. The concrete experiences of acceptance, engagement and friendship can be more easily understood. Those are palpable experiences that can accumulate and help in defining a more abstract concept like love and God. Moreover, those daily experiences are the markers of unconditional love that exemplify the core of our faith. Jacob Artson, a person who has to type to communicate said, "A religious person is someone who lives love unconditionally." That love is a gateway to the personal experience of God.

Our goal is transformation. Can we radically reform society to accept all? That is a message of God's love. We are all called to be warriors for human dignity. How can we open our doors in new ways that invite families of people with special needs into our community? How do we move outside our doors to find them and to meet them where they stand? If we are not all of us welcome, then is the Lord present?



See the person. See the love in the family. Find a way to not just see the diagnosis.

"THE PRESENCE OF HIS LOVE" - AUTHOR UNKNOWN

The passengers on the bus watched sympathetically as the attractive young woman with the white cane made her way carefully up the steps. She paid the driver, and using her hands to feel the location of the seats, walked down the aisle and found the seat he'd told her was empty. Then she settled in, placed her briefcase on her lap and rested her cane against her leg.

It had been a year since Susan, thirty-four, became blind. Due to a medical misdiagnosis, she had been rendered sightless, and she was suddenly thrown into a world of darkness, anger, frustration and self-pity. Once a fiercely independent woman, Susan now felt condemned by this terrible twist of fate to become a powerless, helpless burden on everyone around her.

She would plead, her heart knotted with anger, "How could this have happened to me?" But no matter how much she cried or ranted or prayed, she knew the painful truth her sight was never going to return. A cloud of depression hung over Susan's once optimistic spirit. Just getting through each day was an exercise in frustration and exhaustion. And all she had to cling to was her husband Mark.

Mark was an Air Force officer and he loved Susan with all of his heart. When she first lost her sight, he watched her sink into despair and was determined to help his wife gain the strength and confidence she needed to become independent again. Mark's military background had trained him well to deal with sensitive situations, and yet he knew this was the most difficult battle he would ever face.

Finally, Susan felt ready to return to her job, but how would she get there? She used to take the bus, but was now too frightened to get around the city by herself. Mark volunteered to drive her to work each day, even though they worked at opposite ends of the city. At first, this comforted Susan and fulfilled Mark's need to protect his sightless wife who was so insecure about performing the slightest task.

Soon, however, Mark realized that this arrangement wasn't working - it was hectic, and costly. Susan is going to have to start taking the bus again, he admitted to himself. But just the thought of mentioning it to her made him cringe. She was still so fragile, so angry. How would she react?



Just as Mark predicted, Susan was horrified at the idea of taking the bus again. "I'm blind! How am I supposed to know where I'm going? I feel like you're abandoning me," she responded bitterly.

Mark's heart broke to hear these words, but he knew what had to be done. He promised Susan that each morning and evening he would ride the bus with her, for as long as it took, until she got the hang of it. And that is exactly what happened.

For two solid weeks, Mark, military uniform and all, accompanied Susan to and from work each day. He taught her how to rely on her other senses, specifically her hearing, to determine where she was and how to adapt to her new environment. He helped her befriend the bus drivers who could watch out for her, and save her a seat. He made her laugh, even on those not-so-good days when she would trip exiting the bus, or drop her briefcase.



"THE PRESENCE OF HIS LOVE" - CONTINUED

Each morning they made the journey together, and Mark would take a cab back to his office. Although this routine was even more costly and exhausting than the previous one, Mark knew it was only a matter of time before Susan would be able to ride the bus on her own. He believed in her, in the Susan he used to know before she'd lost her sight, who wasn't afraid of any challenge and who would never, ever quit.

Finally, Susan decided that she was ready to try the trip on her own. Monday morning arrived, and before she left, she threw her arms around Mark, her temporary bus riding companion, her husband, and her best friend. Her eyes filled with tears of gratitude for his loyalty, his patience, his love. She said good-bye, and for the first time, they went their separate ways. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday... Each day on her own went perfectly, and Susan had never felt better. She was doing it! She was going to work all by herself!

On Friday morning, Susan took the bus to work as usual. As she was paying for her fare to exit the bus, the driver said, "Boy, I sure envy you." Susan wasn't sure if the driver was speaking to her or not. After all, who on earth would ever envy a blind woman who had struggled just to find the courage to live for the past year? Curious, she asked the driver, "Why do you say that you envy me?"



The driver responded, "It must feel so good to be taken care of and protected like you are." Susan had no idea what the driver was talking about, and asked again, "What do you mean?"

The driver answered, "You know, every morning for the past week, a fine looking gentleman in a military uniform has been standing across the corner watching you when you get off the bus. He makes sure you cross the street safely and he watches you until you enter your office building. Then he blows you a kiss, gives you a little salute and walks away. You are one blessed lady."

Tears of happiness poured down Susan's cheeks. For although she couldn't physically see him, she had always felt Mark's presence. She was blessed, so blessed, for he had given her a gift more powerful than sight, a gift she didn't need to see to believe - the gift of love that can bring light where there had been darkness.



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I will have the distinct privilege of presenting at the NC-CEC Conference, along with two of my colleagues (Shirley Parker—School Psychologist and Rosie Rankin—Career Development/Special Populations Coordinator) on February 9, 2012, at 1:45 PM. We will be presenting on the topic of "Quest To Becoming Your Best—A Mindful Journey To Success."

If you are in attendance, please plan to join us!

Visit our website - <http://www.becomingyourbest.com/> and become a friend on Facebook at Becoming Your Best. We appreciate your support in spreading hope and encouragement to others.