

Witnessing

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I SIT CROSS-LEGGED ON THE FLOOR of the playroom. Eighteen-month-old Sabrina moves closer and looks at me. She picks up a green crayon. I do the same. She says “uh,” and holds the crayon over her head. I do the same. I wait until she brings her hand down before I bring down mine. She is the leader, this is her dance, and I am here to follow her every step. She picks up another crayon, a blue one, and taps both crayons on the floor. The carpet muffles their sound, so she awkwardly gets up and totters to the low table and tries again. I take another crayon — mine is purple — and crawl over to the table. *Bang, bang,* go her crayons. “Eee,” she says. And “Eee,” I go. She becomes aware of the game now and realizes that she is in charge.

She looks at me to see what I will do. She bangs the crayons on the table again, then raises them over her head, then bangs them back on the table. I follow every gesture, mimic every sound. Her smile stretches past her face and into my heart. She is making more sounds now, “naa” and “uh-ee.” She laughs when she discovers that there are no limits. She stands up and plops down on the carpet, then laughs from the root of her being. Tears come to my own eyes as I realize what I am doing. I am her witness. I am here to listen to her in her world in her way. I am the first person in her life to witness her this thoroughly.

Sabrina has developmental delays. She is only just starting to walk. She has no words and she can't use a spoon yet. Yet, in this moment, she is being seen for who she is, not who she will be or who she should be. Just her, my sweet baby girl. I cry as I realize what a gift this is, for me to be her witness. All of us, every one of us, needs this, to be both witnessed and to give witness. Words aren't necessary. Only the act of being here for another. No judgment, no concerns, no opinions at all.

Everything changed in that moment for me. I still get frustrated with my daughter. I still get resentful of her neediness. But from that moment on I understood her. I understood she was doing the best she could. In that moment, it was enough.

A year later and it wasn't enough. Sabrina still did not have words. She pointed at things she wanted. She used grunts and sounds. She used eye contact and touching to get people's attention. She communicated in many ways, but not with words. I told people she was much younger than she was.

It kills me, her lack of language. Everything else I can handle. I define myself with my language, but she does not. I live by my words, work with them, connect and love through them. I know my sons by what they talk to me about. I can comfort their bad dreams. Offer to listen when they need to work out social problem. We can talk about our plans, our dreams and our memories. Sabrina cannot share that with us, and it hurts me.

Sometimes grief infused me when I am reminded that she is not normal, and I wring my heart out with worry that she may never be a typical kid. She looks like the other kids, but she runs with a lopsided gait. She is healthy and yet she doesn't appear to understand at least half of what is said to her. It's almost as if her body is communicating but not yet her mind. She alternates between being cheerful, excited and willing, and being whiny, clingy and frustrated. I notice that I do, too. Some days I feel blessed and some days I feel paralyzed with heartache. It's

hard to always pay attention to what she needs and wants, and to pay attention to my own needs and wants as well. Her, me, my two sons, husband, parents, family, friends, schools . . . we all live with special needs.

I was not shocked when the therapy team at the hospital told me she had delays. Obviously I knew she wasn't developing normally — that's why I'd come in. They could not offer a reason, or a cause, or an idea of what the future would hold for her. I was never shocked, but still I have grieved; I have been spurred by guilt into action, demanding more services. And I have wept for all that isn't and all that is.

As she gets older and more able — dressing herself in her own pink outfits, trying to draw faces, getting her own yogurt and spoon — I have learned to stop telling people she is younger than she is. Sabrina doesn't mind, she never did. It was my problem, not hers. She is happy, she lives in the moment. All is well in Sabrina's world. I carry the burden for both of us. I worry and weep, despair and deny, laugh and love. It is my job, my agreement with her. I offer her a witness and she gives me back my own deep breaths. I have stopped lying about her.

I stood as she was born. She slipped from my body like a sea otter, breathing in the salty air of the ocean's womb. She cried for over an hour, longer than the whole birth. She was nearly 10 pounds, with full lips and long legs. My friend, Danae, who witnessed us, told me she had never seen a woman stand in her own truth like I did to birth my girl. I felt like a Hindu goddess, holding a sword, a spoon, a pen and a magic wand in my four powerful arms. I knew, even then, that this was no ordinary daughter. And that I would need those four arms to mother her.

I tell the truth now about everything. I tell it because I am no longer capable of lying. It's been slashed out of me through this journey in the special-needs world. But the main reason I tell the truth is that Sabrina understands the difference. I can't lie about her age — she knows she is four and that she had a tea party with her girlfriends for her birthday. Sabrina started to talk. She told me that the pea soup I gave her was "yucky." She tells me she wants waffles instead of oatmeal for breakfast. She tells me that she went out and played in the snow with her brothers and it was fun.

Her words are still blurry, like she's coming up for air. But I can understand her most of the time. I have learned to listen without words. But the only way I can do it is to stay true to who I am. That is the only way I can fully witness her. I can only really see her if my own eyes are clear, my own hands clean and my own heart present. And perhaps, some day, she will tell me her dreams. But for now, as she leaves for school, she cheerfully calls out, "Gye, ee ou ater." And I am grateful to be her mother. Most days, it is enough.