

So I wrote a draft of my dvar torah, it just needed a little editing that I planned to do yesterday. It was lovely, filled with insight and wisdom. Trust me. Unfortunately I wasn't able to finish it because life got in the way. So instead I've decided to give you a little window into that life, because I've found that the best way to make positive change in a way that reflects people's needs is to understand where they are coming from.

Friday morning, and as usual I try to start the day with a short meditation, but as I am sitting I get one of those robocalls that V's school is delayed 1 ½ hours. I barely have a chance to wish myself and all beings peace and good health when there is another call saying, "School is cancelled today. This is for the safety of your child." Now maybe *your* child, I think, but monitoring the safety of a 12 year old boy with autism and the athletic prowess of someone twice his size, the impulse control of someone half his age and the energy of someone who has just had a triple espresso requires a level of stamina that makes a snow day feel like boot camp. (In fact, research shows that caregivers of teenage boys with autism have the stress level of combat soldiers.)

Just getting through the early morning is an ordeal, let alone an entire day... A bath requires unlocking and then relocking a chest of toiletries, removing and then replacing the shampoo and soap and toothpaste, because really, there is nothing more satisfying in life to a sensory-seeking kid than squeezing the bejeezus out of a new tube of toothpaste or watching the contents of a bottle spill on the ground.

It is something we have been working on for years with little success, the type of atypical behavior for which a child is easily judged and a parent typically blamed. "Why can't you make it just go away?"

But it is not as simple as that.

Making breakfast requires opening 3 latches each on 2 separate gates, using magnets to get food out of cupboards, and repeating this each time I enter and leave the kitchen. Oops, forget to latch one of them, and he hurdles over a 4 foot gate and locates the chocolate hidden in a top cupboard behind a row of supplements - all recommended to alter his brain function, to create calm or increase language function, all sworn to be so delicious any kid would love it, never detect once stirred in juice - all except for mine, who swirls it around in his mouth like a oenophile, only to spit it out when he thinks no one is looking. In the moment it takes to open a gate to feed the dog he hurdles over the other side, locating some lemon sorbet carefully hidden behind a bag of potstickers.

He is so pernicious, observant, and yes, smarter than the average person, in a way that is exhausting to live with and heartbreaking in how overlooked or underestimated his type of intelligence is. The wiring for language might be faulty but neither is his mind filled with useless thoughts. It is clear and free to notice everything, to remember details.

By the time we are done eating and all the burners are off and the gates are shut, and the leash is on the dog and boots on both humans and 3 locks on the front door – not to keep anyone out as there is little of real value; it's just to keep the humans inside – and we go out for a walk it's hard to believe it is only 9 o'clock.

Maybe I will finish writing the dvar while we walk the dog. Like many writers, I can do my best work while on a walk. Sentences and paragraphs just flood my mind and come out in perfect sequence. All I need is a free minute to get it down once back inside.

We walk in the still fresh snow on quiet streets, three creatures moving through a storm just like every day, but there's a muted beauty with more softness than usual. My son sings a song he just heard and remembers with a precision he lacks with the spoken word. His voice is clear, his pitch is perfect, and the entire song fills the air. The dog smells things I could never sense. Every day they strengthen my belief that there are things out there beyond what we can know, that there are mysteries in life and we can't be so certain we understand it all.

By the time we come home and get inside and I'm taking off the dog's leash I realize that I forgot to triple lock the back door, and V has darted back outside. I find him lying in the hammock, face down in the snow. I join him, feeling the cold heavy blanket of snow melting beneath us, watching snow fall on snow as we rock back and forth, the weight and movement creating a little slice of heaven for a sensory-seeking child.

I know him as well as any person can know another, but it's an intimacy that's rarely acknowledged. Of all the misperceptions about people with autism it is the notion that they don't make human connections that makes me shudder. Nothing could be further from the truth. There's so much pressure: to normalize, to make progress, and blend in - that simply being, simply loving another person can seem so insignificant a task rather than the miracle it really is.

Finally back inside, I am sure I will have a moment free to get this all down, but he's found his lunch box all ready for the day that was cancelled, and hungrily starts devouring the contents : the sunflower butter on matzo, the pineapple chunks, the juice and rice crackers. It's not even 10 am and already there are 2 loads of laundry, a sink of pans and dishes , a floor filled with crumbs – fortunately, the dog helps with that – there is still a supplement to try to ingest and the newspaper sits on the floor, its plastic wrapper used for the dog's walk." read me, read me." It calls out. And all I want to do is sit curled up with a cup of tea and find out how the world is falling apart today.

Instead, we open the iPad, the communication device of choice for visual thinkers. "How do you feel?"

“I feel happy.” That is almost always the answer, and almost always the truth. Another gift far underestimated. Who wouldn’t want to live with so much joy?

How do *I* feel? Not that anyone is asking but I tell you I’d make use of all those other icons on the page. Yes, *happy*. But also, “I feel *sleepy*.” “I feel *angry*” when I hear people exclaim how nice and relaxing snow days are, as if we all lived the same experience. “I feel *sad*” when people don’t take the time to consider what makes another’s life harder or just different than theirs. And if there was a face that was covered with a blanket that said “Leave me alone for a while!” I’d pick that one too.

The truth is, I don’t want to be doing this, I don’t want to be explaining it to you, there are so many things I’d rather be discussing that are far more interesting, but this is my life right now. A spiritual practice doesn’t just happen in a vacuum or on a cushion or a chair in a quiet room like this. It’s what we do every day, every moment.

People often say to me, “I don’t know how you do it!” or “I could *never* do what you do!” It seems a false sort of praise, something you say to distance yourself rather than place yourself in someone else’s shoes. Of course you could, and you would do any difficult job that was put on your plate. We will all at some point have something placed there that is more than we think we can handle. But we won’t have a choice.

The subtext of saying that you couldn’t imagine facing someone else’s challenges is “Thank God it is *you* and not *me*.” There is not much ‘God’ in that response; just ‘you’ and ‘me,’ separate and unconnected, what Einstein called “the optical delusion of consciousness” that makes us think we are not part of the same universe and creates a kind of prison. Our task, he wrote, is “to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace everyone.”

But we can’t feel compassion until we can understand what makes someone else’s life difficult or meaningful. Maybe very different from your life, but connected all the same.

May we all be happy.

May we all be at peace.

May we all be free from pain and fear

May we all be accepting, and accepted.

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