

I was asked to be an after-dinner speaker for Washington State Autism Society's 1999 'Best in the Northwest' Conference. For such an occasion, they wanted something light, humorous and inspiring, perhaps including stories from daily life in my family. Although a professional speaker for a number of years, thus far my presentations haven't been the paragon of humor and levity. I realized that the best way to proceed that evening would be to invite my husband and son to join the effort at being light and entertaining.

I knew my husband, Craig, would enjoy participating, as well as having the opportunity to visit Yakima, Washington where we had lived eight years, prior to moving to Oregon. I also knew that Jordan, my eleven year old son with autism, had no problem whatsoever, being in front of an audience. If you combine that with the knowledge that most thoughts in his head come out rapidly through his mouth, it will come as no surprise that Jordan stole the show that evening (and made his mom a bit more humble, in the process.)

The talk was titled, "Making More than the Most of It" because of the gifts eventually uncovered when parenting a child with autism. The expression "making the most of it", gives the impression that a situation is negative, limiting and fraught with tragedy. Most parents start this journey, "making the most of it", taking one day at a time, tiptoeing through the maze of autism information and services. They try to keep one step ahead of the sense of impending doom that something really awful is overtaking family life.

We shared a photo album with words, showing "snapshots" of ways our family has managed to make **more** than the most of it. The first "picture" focused on learning to ask for help as a means to do more than just survive. Craig told his story about weekly Rotary Club meetings in that very hotel. As his multiple sclerosis progressed, it became harder to climb the stairs, and to go through the buffet line. Craig submitted a letter of resignation citing the difficulties he faced attending meetings. The club president called him instantly with solutions, allowing him to comfortably participate in the club until we moved to Oregon two years later. He had assisted Craig in moving away from his focus on merely making the most of it!

Then came a “picture” showing my gratitude to Jordan. The experience of being his mom gave me focus, insight and great satisfaction in my work as a psychotherapist. Without him in my life, I might still be searching for career direction and meaning. Now I have a rich opportunity to witness very courageous people sharing their struggles and reworking their stories of loss, into stories of hope.

Together, Craig and I showed snapshots of ways that humor transforms our journey. Our stories elicited many laughs during the evening. However, Jordan stole the show unintentionally with his unexpected interjections. In the middle of a story, I heard a little voice behind me. “Mom, I love you!” I basked in the sighs of sweetness radiating from the audience until his next utterance. “Mom, I’m afraid of you!” When I could regain my composure amid the chuckles in the crowd, I queried, “You’re afraid of me?!” He went on. “Well Mom, it’s just an expression. Mom, it’s when you talk sharp. Mom, do you talk sharp because you’re tired?” By this time, the audience was thoroughly entranced. I told myself that I better show them how I could skillfully end this little interlude! In my best parent sing-song voice I said, “Okay Jordan, one more comment and it’s time to stop. Mom needs to talk to these people!” He provided the proverbial straw that felled the camel! “Mom, I think you talk sharp because you’re not very patient!” They were rolling on the floor. (Thank you dear Jordan for so aptly demonstrating the part humor plays in our life and for keeping me humble...)

Music is also a significant photo in our family album. I played guitar and sang “Give Yourself to Love” by Kate Wolf, a song that holds much meaning for me. Then Jordan came up to sing “Tomorrow,” which he had performed a few weeks earlier at his school talent show. How silly of us to think he was done talking! “Mom, after I sing, can I talk some more?” I quickly responded (in that sing-song voice, of course), “No Jordan honey, I think you’ve talked enough!” His disappointment was buoyed by loud, but friendly protests from the audience. “No, let him talk mom...!” At that moment I knew I was licked!

We described the last picture of the evening with a story that clearly demonstrated how we had come to realize, that our family's path was no better or worse than any other family. We no longer had to simply 'make the most' of a bad situation. Now was the opportunity to see our family through a new lens. We could acknowledge who we were, and what was possible, without comparison to old expectations and dreams. Admittedly, I am half-hearted in my complaints about Jordan's antics that evening. Being able to share the photo album of my family, with their active participation was truly an incredible experience.

We are so fortunate to have found ways to make more than the most of it with the challenges we face. Undoubtedly many of you already have snapshots to highlight from your own family album. It is crucial to take the time, periodically, to continue sharpening your focus to capture a view of those gifts that are already present in everyday life.