Never A Dull Moment

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father,
Mable Hall Seibert
and
H. Van Seibert,
who were my first and best teachers.

To Randee and Dorothy, my first classroom team.
You both left this earth too soon, but I feel your influence
in my classroom every day.

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1 THERE ARE WORSE THINGS THAN BEING HUNGRY

Mark was a student in my "higher functioning" classroom of intellectually challenged teenagers. Back then, in the early 1970s, these kids were labelled as EMR, Educable Mentally Retarded. In short, Mark looked normal, but he was smart enough to know he wasn't normal.

Mark's mother was a prostitute. They lived in the high-rise "projects" on the north side of the large metropolitan city where I taught. He was a little short for seventeen (about 5'4"), very slender, and looked even more slender in his too-small jeans and plaid shirts. He had shoulder-length brown hair with bangs. (It WAS the 1970s) He had a pleasant face with round brown eyes, but rarely smiled. Life was rough for him.

He had been traumatized, I figured, by living in a situation where his mother would answer their door, let a man in, tell Mark to stay in the living room with the TV blaring, and take her "john" back to the bedroom. One time, early in the fall, Mark missed a whole week of school. The school social worker told me that Mark had been

staying in a temporary foster home for the week and was getting some counseling. When Mark returned to class, he calmly relayed the story of what had happened; apparently, he witnessed the suicide of his mother's pimp. The man simply jumped out of the window in Mark's fifth floor apartment. But now, Mom was back in business and Mark was back at home.

This created another problem. That now-deceased pimp had been Mark's transportation to and from school. There should have been a school bus, but his mother had been very unreliable at getting Mark up and ready for school in time to keep the bus on schedule, so she agreed to get him there without the help of the school system. Now, he had no ride to school. The social worker was a short-term solution. I needed to teach Mark to ride the city bus. He would need to know how to ride it when he graduated and got a job, so now was a good time to learn.

Well, I grew up on a farm. I had never really spent much time even walking on a city sidewalk, let alone riding a city bus. Mark and I learned together. He caught on quickly, even doing a great job asking the driver for a transfer, but he had one looming fear. People in his project neighborhood were regularly mugged. His mother wasn't worried. She was confident that "the folks who live here won't mess with my boy. They know better." She forgot her enforcer was dead, and sure enough, Mark was robbed of his watch and wallet the first time he rode home alone from school. It was just after Thanksgiving, and Mark's holiday season was about to get worse.

There was a horrible flu going around. Mark became ill two weeks before Christmas vacation started. Joyce, the social worker, checked on him a couple times a week. She reported to me that although he was over the worst of it, he was still weak and recovering slowly.

Mark would miss the big Santa Party we had every year. Our special education school had about 200 students attending. Right before vacation, a wonderful Santa would enter the gym, where we had gathered all the children. It was chaos. Santa would read each name from a list. The students would take their turns walking up on the stage (or be taken up there in their wheelchair) where Santa was seated on his throne. Santa would bestow each child with a large bag of wrapped gifts for them to take home and open. The social worker planned to take Mark's gifts to his apartment, so I briefly quit worrying.

I started worrying again, right after lunch that day, when Mark showed up for school. He could barely walk. We had already finished gathering all the kids around the edge of the gym. They were being led in a raucous chorus of holiday songs, so I seated Mark on one of the staff chairs and waited with him for the singing to end and the present distribution to begin. When Santa called his name, Mark struggled to his feet, nearly knocking over the folding chair where he was sitting. I stood up to reach for him, but he fainted, falling at my feet. Miss Pauline, who was the school nurse, along with Joyce and the principal, helped me carry him to the nurse's office. We placed him gently on her padded wooden cot and applied damp cloths to his clammy forehead.

He awakened after a short time, and had no idea where he was. When he saw the four of us there together, he said, "I came to school."

Mark was lying on that cot, looking so very pale and incredibly frail. He truly looked like he should have been in the hospital. We phoned his mother, who had no idea he was not in his room at home. We discussed taking him to the hospital across the street, but Pauline concluded that

he was not dehydrated or in need of emergency care, so Joyce and I agreed to give him a ride home. I went down to the gym to get Mark's bag of presents and put them in my car. When I returned to the nurse's office to get Mark, he was asleep. We let him rest for about an hour.

When Mark woke up, I gave him some graham crackers and juice. He sat on the edge of the cot, eating slowly, and we spent a few minutes talking about what had been going on at school while he had been out sick. He mostly listened and ate, and then he apologized for being "so much trouble." I assured him that we did not consider him any trouble and that we were the ones who felt badly. I explained that we had hoped he would regain his strength over the two weeks of Christmas Break.

Then I asked the question. To this day, I have not forgotten this. It was innocent enough and really, a natural question to ask. I was expressing concern over the possibility that he could have collapsed on the city bus or on the street....that he could have been injured.

"Mark, why did you try to come to school when you were so weak?"

He replied, "I knew this was the only Christmas I would have,"

Yeah, let that sink in for a minute. I didn't have a minute. It hit all of us in the room like a brick; the social worker, the nurse, and I. We all moved straight to Mark and embraced him. He was so physically delicate at this point; let me assure you it was a light embrace; much lighter than we would have preferred to have given him.

Mark said, through his tears, "I love you."

We replied that we loved him, and the four of us just stood there, together, for a bit longer. Feeling that love.

Pauline got him bundled up in his coat, adding a warm scarf, hat, and mittens from her closet. Joyce went to her office pantry to get some extra food for Mark to take home. I went to warm up my car.

It was a quick ride to the bitterly cold near-north side of the downtown area. I told Mark to stay in his apartment over the winter break and to rest up. Then, I waited in the car while Joyce helped Mark get inside, and while she took in the presents and the food.

That was the last time I saw Mark. When Joyce tried to contact them during break, she discovered they had left the day after we dropped him off. The neighbor said they "went to Chicago for Christmas." Despite several attempts, Joyce could never locate them after that.

Mark, wherever you are, I hope that awful Christmas has faded from your memory. The only part I don't want you to forget is that you are loved. Love can get you through being ill, being lonely, being neglected, even being hungry. I hope that wherever you are now, you are wanted, fed, cared for, and loved by those around you.

Mark, wherever you are now, I want to thank you for this lesson in life. It's not the presents, the food, or the festivities that make Christmas or any occasion important. It's love....simply the human love we have for each other. Without love, as the famous book says, we are nothing.

2 BEFORE AUTISM WAS AN EPIDEMIC

Corey had beautiful eyes....well, I thought they were beautiful. They were the most charming, warm, brown eyes I had ever seen in a child. You had to look him in the eyes; they just drew you in. But Corey could not maintain eye contact for any length of time. He was a savant; an artistic savant; a savant with autism.

He echoed what you said, but was unable to construct an answer for any question he was asked, like "What did Corey have for breakfast?" He would just smile and reply, "Corey have for breakfast?"

He rocked. His arms would flail in mid-air at times of excitement or confusion. When he stood still and was not asked any questions, he appeared to be pretty normal; a handsome, tall, well-built, African-American sixteen year old. His single mother was a hotel maid. Corey adored her. He very seldom was unhappy. He smiled when spoken to and tried dutifully to follow directions. His mother had raised him to be a gentleman; he opened doors for me and would try to relieve me of any large loads he might see me carrying. I still wish I could have relieved Corey of his

burden; and freed him to fully express his monumental talent. Autism doesn't work like that.

I know this now, because I have a grandson with autism. He is also a savant, being hyperlexic, an expert on exotic animals, and also a calendar savant. His art, sense of humor, and creativity are impressive.

However, Corey was my first contact with autism, back in 1974. Educators certainly did not know everything we now know about it. There was very little information. There was no mention of autism in my college classes.

Corey was in my classroom of mentally challenged, mentally ill, higher-functioning high school students. He fit right in. Except for that art thing.

Back then, copies were made on mimeograph machines. Purple ink, damp stinky paper... the kind of smell we used to pretend to get "high" on. Pretty toxic stuff. There were no Xerox machines or copy machines as we know them today. There was certainly no way to enlarge or reduce pictures; unless you had Corey in your room. Corey could draw them exactly like they were printed, any size I needed. He had multiple fancy fonts, also. Flawlessly executed.

How to channel that talent? Or was it OK to just let him use it for his own amusement? He had no friends, so Corey had never been invited to a sleepover, or a birthday party, or gone on a date. He wasn't going to get his driver's license or go to a football game or the prom. His entire source of 'fun' was his drawing. Maybe we should just leave the kid alone and let him draw. Don't try to turn him into 'something'.

I was a young, enthusiastic teacher. I had to try.....try

something. I entered him in the nearby state university "World Law Day" poster competition. He would be competing with twenty extremely talented high school artists from all over the state. I sat him down with a box of markers, showed him the promotional materials from the event, and he began drawing. His first drawing was a beautiful rendition of the globe, with tall white columns all around it, and a collection of multi-cultural faces. He added some of his magazine-ready script, and he had the winning entry done in about twenty minutes.

Corey was not really public appearance material, so his mother would not allow him to go accept his award. Disappointed, but understanding, I accepted a shiny plaque and the $100.00 prize for him.

His mother and I, with our school's art teacher, brainstormed ways to spend the money on Corey. Art books? A day at the local amusement mega-park? New clothes? Markers and art paper?

We chose an exquisite calligraphy set. Corey's mother felt he might be able to help them earn some extra money if he could create handmade monogrammed card sets. He loved to make ornate script letters, but they would be more marketable if they were not done with markers. She bought some high-quality plain cards from a stationery supplier and intended to have him make sets of cards. She would market them in packages of six or eight cards in boutiques around the city. It seemed like a good plan; entrepreneurial, but simple. All the staff at the school bought some. They were really beautiful, but there was a serious problem. Corey started to balk at making them. He was, of course, unable to explain himself, but he made it quite clear; "No." "All done." These were bold self-assertions for an echolalic; his own brief opinions about this repetitive and uninspired task. He had done some to

humor us, but this was not the way he wanted to express his art.

In what seemed to be a dramatic protest, Corey drastically changed his style of drawing. He drew fewer small pictures and almost no script. He began drawing poster-sized illustrations of wild animals, which were subjects he had never done before. When my classroom moved to the basement of one of the high schools, the principal there insisted on purchasing a drawing of a cougar that Corey had done. He had it professionally framed, and placed it on the wall behind his desk. It looked like it had come from an expensive wildlife gallery. After we encouraged Corey to do a few more similar drawings of other wild animals, he caught on, and switched to pictures of farm animals and Native Americans.

His mother realized what was going on with his efforts to undermine our joint efforts to commercialize his creativity, and she wisely put a stop to it all. She knew Corey better than anyone else. She realized that despite her (and our) well-intentioned efforts to help her only son find a way that would allow him to generate an income as an adult, Corey wanted no part of it. He just wanted to draw. He wanted to draw what he wanted, when he wanted, and he wanted everyone to stop taking it away from him and selling it.

Lesson learned.

Oh, did I mention the name of the school where I taught? The name of the school where Corey taught me this lesson? The name was Emerson School.

This school was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson, that feisty mid-19th century champion of individualism and being true to your "nature". That's all Corey really