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In Our Own Words

By Janet Farrell Leontiou, Ph.D.

My son, Andreas, will not necessarily change the world by what he does but by who he is. Andreas is 4 and has spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, and he cannot speak, walk, or crawl. Yet Andreas positively affects almost all of the people with whom he interacts because of his nature. He has an engaging smile and eyes that emit beams of light. Andreas is a beautiful, sensual being who will throw his head back and close his eyes to receive a kiss on the cheek. He delights in fast cars, strong breezes, live music, scary movies, and exciting amusement rides. He is alive, and he experiences joy on such a deep level that he reminds me and others that we all have this capacity for joy within us.

Andreas' limitations make his impact on me all the more astonishing. In a short time, he has taught me a few of life's most important lessons: be in the present, do not feed the fear, see the person not the label, do not identify with external standards, be grateful, and tap into potential.

The Buddhists teach: Be Here Now. Andreas brings this out in me because I have learned that as long as I stay in the present, I am OK.

As soon as I start to wonder if he will ever walk or talk I am overcome with fear, and when this happens I am less useful to him. Fear, I once learned, stands for False Expectations Appearing Real. I used to become afraid when I would take Andreas

to therapy and at the facilities I would see much older children in wheelchairs, and not speaking. In some cases, the young people still could not master the infant skill of holding up their heads. My worst fears would promulgate until I developed the discipline to pull myself back to the present and to my son. The truth is, I do not know what will be. I only know what is and what my son needs now.

I have come to appreciate that other children are not a blueprint for Andreas. He will not become them, for better or for worse; nor will he crawl, cruise and walk like his twin brother Zachary.

Nevertheless, Andreas, like any child, has potential. It is my job to help him maximize that potential. Through education, he will be led out from darkness into the world. I want him to know other people with cerebral palsy who are accomplished people. I want him to know that he is on his own path but that others can inspire him, and give breath to something lying dormant.

Andreas reminds me that what matters most is what we do with our potential. He has a choice, as do all of us. He can see himself and define himself by his limitation or his possibilities. It will be his choice and his choice has consequences.

Andreas has had a splendid beginning, and he leaves me and others with much to anticipate. I have every confidence that he will change the world because of who he is and who he is to become.

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