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CEREBRAL PALSY MAGAZINE

The **LIFE** Program

The Challenges of Learning
and Using New Skills

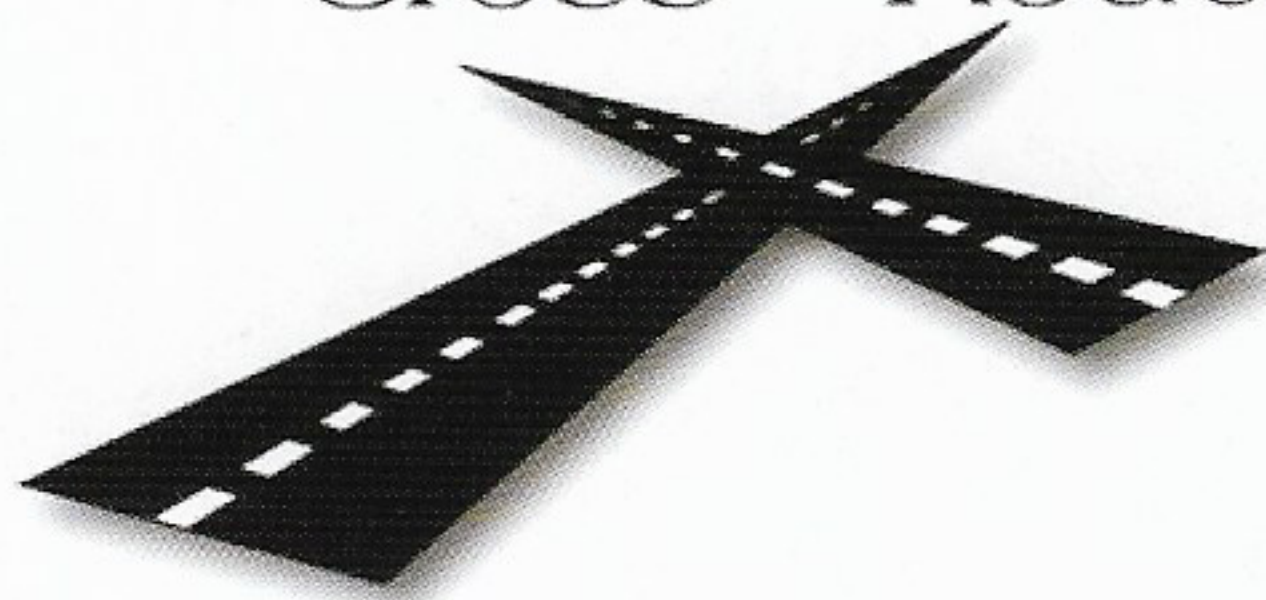
STRENGTHENING PROGRAM
BECOMES STANDARD
TREATMENT

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Lately, I have been reflecting on how the world gives you what you give it. This is the message I teach my students in college-level communications classes. The script goes something like this: blame others and the blame will be recast back towards us. Ultimately, blaming others takes away our power because it invites us to see ourselves as victims. Once we have a scapegoat, we have closure. We no longer need to think about an answer because we have the answer. The reason why I am experiencing distress is because of the other. Blaming others keeps us stuck and works to maintain the status quo. It is all so easy and seductive.

Teaching this topic reminds me of how I fall short in my own life. As I drove to class last week, I carried the story of a man who approached me and my sons at church. He asked, in front of my son, "Will he ever get better?" I answered that he is always getting better but inside I was angry and I blamed him. Shortly thereafter, I was teaching a class and a student said: "Sometimes the mother drinks or smokes while pregnant and as a result, the child has disabilities." I spoke about how our assumptions shape what it is we see but inside, I bristled. Later that day, it became

A MOTHER'S Cross Roads



By Janet Farrell Leontiou, Ph.D.

very clear to me. I had blamed the man in church and almost immediately, I was being blamed. I got what I gave.

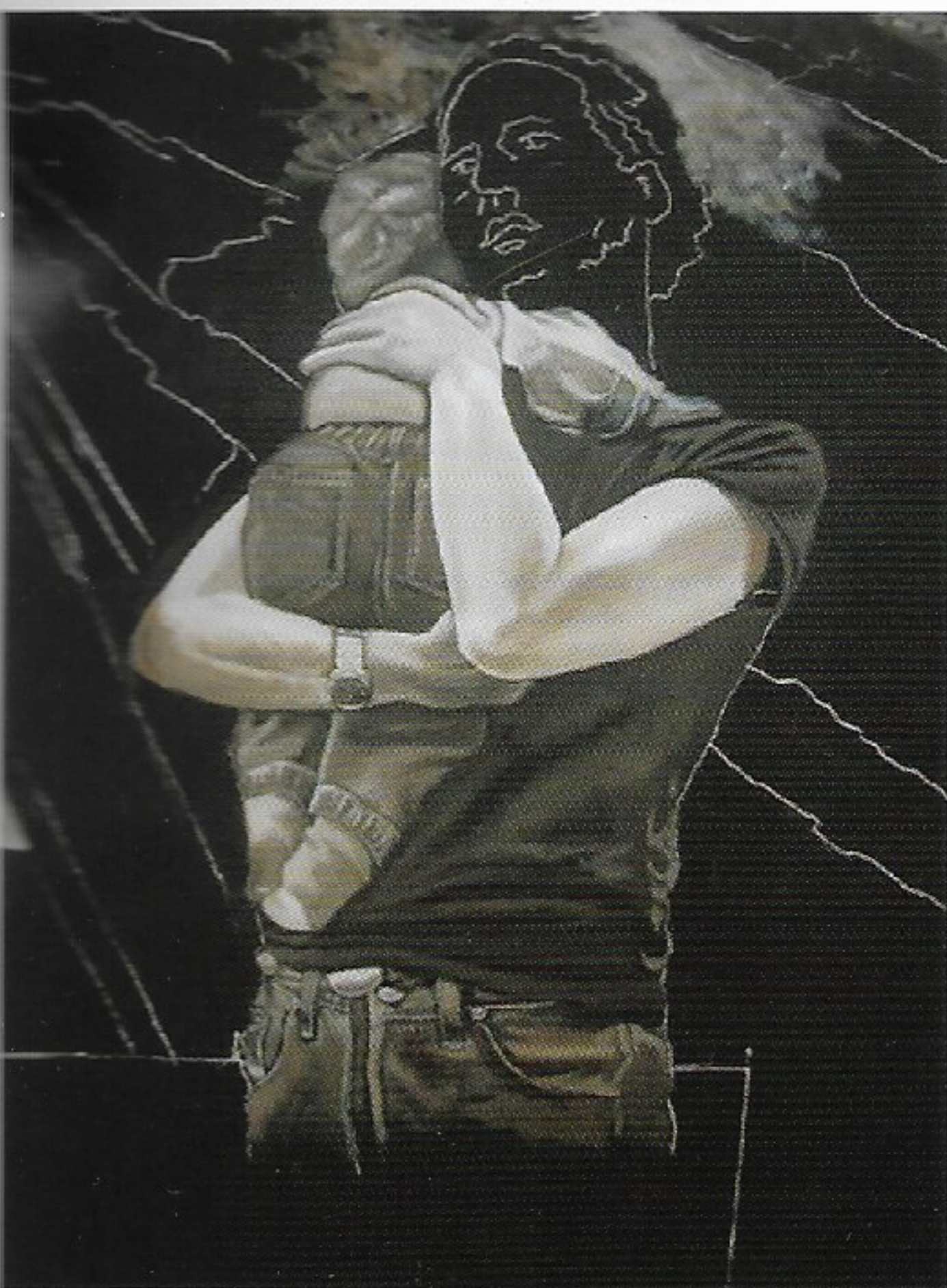
As I reflected on my student's comment, I began to understand. I can see that we maintain this mythology because we want to believe that if we do everything right, we will be safe. It is too unsettling to know what most parents of children with disabilities know. Sometimes things go wrong even if I do everything right. I do not know why my son has cerebral palsy and the reason for his disability may go far beyond that which is understandable.

Like a good bookkeeper, I carry with me all of the thoughtless comments offered to

us about Andreas said in his presence. A huge part of parenting a child with a disability is learning how to respond to these comments with grace. I have in my mind the model of how I would like to respond. The examples come from my students. One returning adult student told a story about taking her four-year old son to the pediatrician's office. While they were in the waiting room, an African American woman came in holding a newborn. My student's son, in loud voice, said: "Look mom. I didn't know that babies come in chocolate!" The mother of the infant smiled and said thank you.

The other story comes from a current student of mine, Shylove. Shylove is working as a geriatric nurse and she is from Haiti. She told the story of coming into a patient's room only to be told by the elderly woman: "I do not want a Negro taking care of me." My student responded: "I am happy to be a Negro; I am also happy to take care of you." Since that day, the woman requests that only Shylove take care of her.

Both women had the grace to take a potentially explosive situation and diffuse the tension. Instead of reacting with anger and hatred,



they chose to respond with love. In Shylove's case, she even used the woman's language—language that was not her own. In the example of the mother with the infant, I admire the model I imagine her to be for her child. For your sake, my sake and for my children's sake, I hope that I can remember both women and choose to take the high road.

Janet Farrell Leontiou, Ph.D. is assistant professor of communications at Nassau Community College and the mother of six year old twin boys, Andreas and Zachary.

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