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Why Do We Have to Be Anything But Beautiful?

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Everyone knows that music is a language. But what role does music play for one who is nonverbal? My son, Andreas, sees Billy Ayres at Arts for Healing in Connecticut for music therapy once a week. Andreas is a six-year old with cerebral palsy and while he makes sounds, he does not speak. Billy and Andreas are beginning to form a relationship based on sounds, rhythms, tones, and vibrations.

"You do not need words to sing," Billy tells Andreas. Rather than trying to get Andreas to produce sounds that sound like words, Billy instead is matching the sounds Andreas is already producing to musical notes. As contrasted with a deficient model that is so frequently used with children with disability, Billy offers an accomplishment model. The message that Andreas is given during these sessions is whatever Andreas is producing is already fine and beautiful.

What I see happening for Andreas during these sessions I have never seen before. He is receiving what happens most naturally for typically developing children. They do not know that the sounds that they producing fit into an entire system called the English language. They get that

through the feedback they receive. I have never before seen Andreas receive feedback that tells him that he is already speaking a language and it is one that others speak as well—music. As his mother, I do not know the language but Billy does. For now, it is good enough that he and Andreas understand.

Having a child with disabilities provides the challenge of trying to see with new eyes. Shifting one's point of view has always been part of the lessons I teach to college students when I teach them about interpersonal communication. My own experience with disabilities makes me think I really know nothing about this topic. The shift that Billy provides is one that Andreas and I both drink up. The shift also stops me. When we were leaving our last session, Billy said: "Your mom is so lucky to have you, Andreas." No one has ever said that to me. In my language, I usually frame it (and so do the majority of others) as he who is the lucky one. My version goes something like this: "If Andreas's spirit had to come into this world in this form, I am glad that he is with me because I will take care of him." But what if I shift out of my arrogant position and say that it is

me who is lucky because Andreas choose me and he choose to help me shift out of my psychological, emotional, spiritual malaise?

In the course of the past six years, I go in and out of awareness. Sometimes, seeing Andreas as a divine gift is difficult. Billy speaks of his own momentary lapse of awareness. "I forget. That is when I pray." As I drive home, I think about my own forgetfulness. In my state of forgetfulness, I see Andreas as a burden and indulge myself in a litany of "if onlys." If only Andreas was like his typically developing brother.

Billy's words reverberate: "That is when I pray." I came very late in my life to prayer and it is not a natural language for me. I now see that when I remember that Andreas is a divine gift, I am remembering God. When I see that I am a victim and wish that my life was different, I am forgetting God. I now understand that the devil is not the fire and brimstone that the nuns taught me in grammar school. I have also learned that sin is not necessarily going against a rule or a commandment. The etymology of the word sin means to miss the mark. Whenever I fail to see beauty and grace, I have missed the mark.



Why is it so easy for me to miss the mark? I think it is because to not miss the mark requires discipline and love. Committing sin is merely indulging in habit. I am reminded of an exercise that I use in the classroom to teach the students about perception. It is the picture of a woman—looked at one way, it is a young woman and looked at another way, and it is an older woman. Students usually see the image one way or the other. Once an image is fixed, it is difficult to see

it any other way. One way comes quite naturally and the other takes work. The way that comes naturally is our habit. The way that requires effort is our work.

I have some friends who seem to see beauty and grace in everything. These are people raised with a deep and profound faith. It seems that these friends have developed the habit of remembering God. I want to be around them as often as I can. I want my kids to be around them as often as they can.

Andreas is fortunate to have many therapists who possess this sensibility as well. This circle has just extended out to include a music therapist.

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