



Ellen Notbohm's Newsletter

Award-winning author and columnist

EllenNotbohm.com

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“Man never made any material as resilient as the human spirit.”

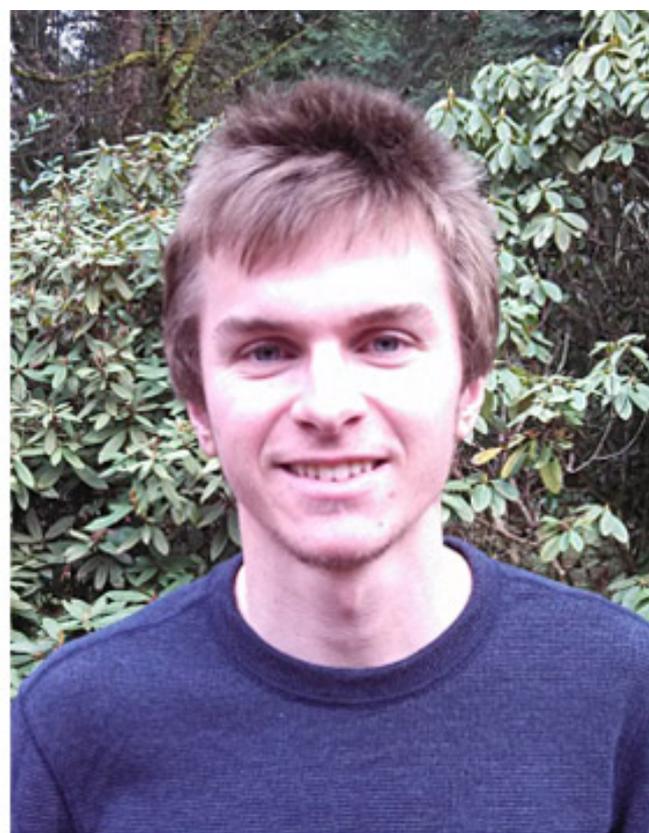
~ Bernard Williams

The R-word You Want for Your Child with Autism

“That's it! It's all over! I've just completed my Associate's Degree in General Studies. I am officially a college graduate!”

I couldn't possibly overstate the elation in our household as Bryce posted those words to Facebook. But any autism parent knows that the simplicity of Bryce's statement comes with a back story about the road to this grand achievement being anything but smooth.

At the start of fall term, Bryce had only one class to complete for his degree, a library science class he wanted to complement the coursework he'd continue at another college. To his shock and dismay, he flunked the first two assignments. We huddled and strategized, fortified ourselves with worst-case scenarios that weren't so bad—but were unacceptable to him. He bore down, soldiered on and brought his grade up to a high B. Then, true to our family motto of “finish strong!” his last assignment put him over the top—he got an A in the class.



Bryce's graduation coincides with that time of year when our mailboxes overflow with warm wishes of joy, peace, prosperity and health. I wish you all those things too, but should they fail to materialize in these sideways, uncertain times, I wish

you, above all, resilience. Because resilience is perhaps the foremost attribute Bryce needed on his quest to become a college graduate.

Resilience: it's the memory foam, the bop-bag punch toy that allows us to regain our equilibrium when life dents us and knocks us off course. It's the difference between woe-is-me and on-to-Plan-B. It's inevitable that people will dishearten us, and, humans that we are, we'll disappoint others—including, at some point, our children.* At those times, we sometimes discover that our children seem more blessed with resilience than us adults. They forgive and forget, or forgive even if they don't forget, or forget without forgiving. Either way, they wipe the slate clean. It's humbling and admirable, and it's another example of how circular is the teacher/learner relationship. Years ago, a dad recounted to me years of struggle with his son. "I couldn't or wouldn't believe that the things he did were a manifestation of his Asperger's," he wrote. "I was the one suffering from a disability. Our relationship has improved greatly, but I still beat myself up about those years when I could have been helping cope with his challenges. Can you help me move on?" In fact, this dad had himself written what he needed in the next paragraph: "Since I've worked to understand my son, I've found his courage and determination inspiring." His son's resilience would lead the way to his own.

Though to some people resilience comes naturally, I believe that for most of us, it's a choice. I wrote to this dad, "Being courageous enough to admit when we're wrong sets the best kind of example for our children. Can I help you move on? Better question: can you help yourself move on? We aren't born knowing how to raise children. What else can you do except learn as you go? Look forward now to all the opportunities to come."

Bryce attended a high school where the long-standing tradition is for parents ask family and friends of their senior-year child to compose palanca notes to present to the student at graduation. Palanca is Spanish for lever, a tool that enables us to lift far more than we would be able to unassisted. A palanca note is a letter of encouragement, empowering the graduate to accomplish things that would not be possible without the support of friends and family. Bryce received dozens of palanca notes, the theme of resilience coming through clearly. One teacher wrote, "You will face challenges and battles, failure and success, but don't be dismayed—you will make it. Your jobs and friendships will change, either by choice or not by choice, but don't be dismayed—you will make it. You will know right from wrong. This is only the beginning and you're in control." Other teachers invoked the words of others, including the Blues Traveler lyric, "There's no such thing as a failure who keeps trying," and the perennial unattributed graduation sentiment "We cannot direct the wind but we can adjust the sails."

Do we think of our children with autism more in terms of rigidity than resilience? Let's not let the former half of that polarity become self-fulfilling prophecy. Given opportunity and example, our children can learn to choose and retain their resilience. In the depths of a profound family loss, Bryce's resilience pulled me along in its wake. One very bad day, he put an arm around me and said, "Like you always tell me, Mom, be yourself and do your best, and it will be good enough." He

confronted misfortune and tragedy by experiencing grief and worry, but vowing not to let them eclipse the challenges and joys of his plans for the life that lay ahead of him.

Proverbs abound in every culture counseling that it's not about how many times we fall, but how many times we get up. We build resilience with the mortar of fortification from others, but ultimately, like the memory foam and the bop bag, it has to rise and soar from our own inner resources. In the moment we need it most, we'll find this to be true. One day I came across a quote on the Internet that I thought summed up the concept of resilience with elegant concision: "There is only a pencil stroke's difference between bitter and better." Imagine the jolt I got when I searched for the author and found it was me.

Bryce's palancas painted a portrait of a young man, a work in progress, who has overcome much of his innate rigidity with the choice to be resilient. In my own palanca to him, I wrote, "Yours is the triumph of a man who understands that perseverance, resilience, integrity and belief in one's self can overcome many obstacles.

How can I be less than your example?"

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* Further reading: [When Great Expectations aren't—and why that's great.](#)

This month in *Autism Asperger's Digest*



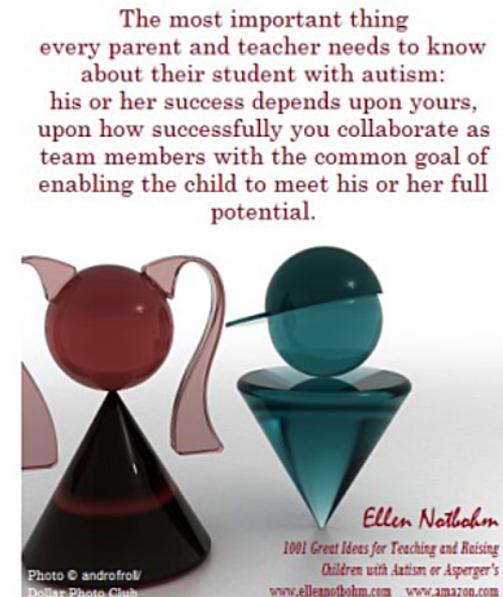
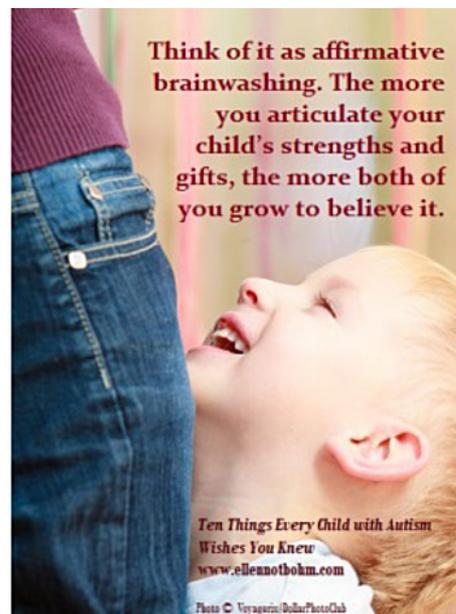
[“What Would He Have Told Me If He Could?”](#)

I teach children who have autism. The aggression toward staff and students of one boy was so hard to manage. I feel like I failed him and his classmates by not being able to establish a safe place for him to learn. What do you think he would have told me if he could have?

All humans—all creatures—need a functional means of communication. In our culture, we've designated speech as the gold standard of interpersonal communication. This emphasis on “using our words” is so prevalent that when children with under-developed language skills reach out to

us nonverbally, we may miss their attempts to connect. Nearly all children with autism need some form of adaptive communication. When we fail to give a child a functional, meaningful means of communication, his needs and wants go unmet and he finds a way to communicate by whatever means he can. This is what your student was telling everyone around him, loud and clear—that he wasn't able to express his needs and wants in the manner expected by the adults around him, and that he had not been taught an alternate form of functional communication. He was forced to resort to the only other means he had—his behavior. . .

This month on my Pinterest quotables board



See more pins:

- For a child with autism, how high is up?
- What a child with autism doesn't owe you
- The words you use to describe a child's autism--inspiring or insidious?
- Beware generalizations—kids with autism don't need another reason to feel "quirky"

Follow my [Pinterest Quotables board](#) for new pins to share each week, or browse my other boards of book reviews, articles, interviews and translations. Got an idea for a board you'd like to see? Contact me [through my website](#) or directly at emailme@ellennotbohm.com.

Downloadable PDF summaries of [Ten Things Every Child with Autism](#)

[**Wishes You Knew**](#) and [**Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew**](#) now available on my website.

Did you miss my [**last newsletter**](#)? Visit the [**archive on my website**](#) for past features.

- When Great Expectations Aren't—and Why That's Great
 - Dude, where's my IEP? Ten Things Parents of Children with Autism Want Principals to Know
 - Smarts and Crafts: Message in a Birdhouse
 - Autism: One Word, Many Truths ... and What Star Trek Has to do with All of This
-

[**On my blog:**](#)

- Tricycle Dreams
 - How to answer “How is he doing?”
 - How these autism parents stayed married
 - “My son is being suspended due to his autism.”
 - “Look me in the eye” demands role reversal
-

Writing your story? Contact me about affordable rates for developmental editing and writer coaching at [**emailme@ellennotbohm.com**](mailto:emailme@ellennotbohm.com)

Excerpts from all my books are on [**my website**](#), including full chapters from *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* and *Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew*. [**www.ellennotbohm.com**](http://www.ellennotbohm.com)

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