I thought I could never accept my baby’s autism. After 29 years there are times when I still wonder who my son might have been. Yet it seems like only yesterday when I held Tariq for the first time. My heart pounded with excitement as I held his soft body next to my heart and our eyes met. I had visions of playing baseball and building model airplanes together.

Everything changed when the “autism bomb” hit and he began endless repetitive activities. He stopped sharing his joy of playing and stopped talking. A few years later he was diagnosed with autism and mental retardation. The impact sent family life veering sharply from the course we were on. That I would lose my perfect baby was beyond anything I could fathom. How could it be that he would grow to adulthood and not read or write or speak? I can remember believing that I would never smile or laugh again.

Parents need support and good services to come to terms with what is possible and what is not for their child. I could not have ever found peace without support. My wife Cindy, Tariq’s stepmom, weathered the storms of his autism with me and never wavered in her love. She knew autism from working in the field and helped me grasp the diagnosis I was trying desperately to deny. It took me two years before I could utter the word “autism.”

I learned deeply through my experience, what Kahlil Gibran meant in The Prophet when he wrote that joy and sorrow are intrinsically woven together, for sorrow opens our hearts to the experience of joy in everyday life. Accepting that his condition would be enduring was imponderable. Nonetheless I learned the developmental approach of celebrating what he could do. This made a huge difference for our relationship. He became a happy child, and I learned to enjoy him and accept him as he was. When I played with him in the ways I thought were weird, he laughed and responded and was happy. When I constantly pushed him to look, to feel, to do the things that seem ‘typical,’ he was frustrated and cranky. The autism I hated with a vengeance refused to go away.

On the path to acceptance, I have learned many things that have helped me understand myself and others. He made me a better father and a better man. His greatest gift to me is a glimpse into the human heart where it is not who you know or what you know or what you have—but who you are. My son has only ever spoken aloud to me once in a while—in my dreams; but this is how his autism has spoken to me every day.

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