

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Life is Beautiful- Even When It's a Roller Coaster
By Debbie Roppolo

Copyright © 2016 Debbie Roppolo. All rights reserved.

“Bless your heart, you’re burdened,” is usually the comment from strangers to me after my twelve-year-old son, Joseph, has a meltdown. In the past, I almost fell over myself in my haste to offer an embarrassed apology and scoot away from what seemed like a throng of people as quickly as possible.

Now an older and wiser me, with teeth gritted, smiles and offers an explanation for Joseph’s actions—he has autism, and something in his surroundings has over-stimulated him, thus the meltdown. Like an infomercial host, I explain ASD—what it is, symptoms, and how things in our environment might affect someone with autism. Sometimes, that’s followed by a sad look from the other person, and they mutter, “My, my...you didn’t ask for that, did you?”

In those circumstances, I bite my lip to keep sarcastic, almost hysterical laughter at bay. The stranger meant well. She was offering compassion, something often lacking in our society. But no, I didn’t ask for my child, my heart, to have a neurological disorder.

Having a child on the autism spectrum is comparable to a roller-coaster ride. There are the up moments. Like when your child says for the first time “Mama, I love you,” and you’ve waited seven years to hear it because he’s been almost completely non-verbal. Or countless hours of teaching and tears (because there doesn’t seem to be comprehension), trying to get him to kick versus dribble the soccer ball into the net. But at the state Special Olympic games he kicks it in on the very first try.

Then there are the times when you're at a restaurant, and your child is having a screaming, kicking fit because the waiter cut the burger in half, and Junior never eats his burger cut in half (kids on the spectrum like routine). Every eye (it seems) is focused on your family, and you wish you could crawl into that darn sandwich and hide from the world.

But, this has been a journey of learning for me. I have discovered how to look past physical appearances and abilities and see people's determination and beauty within. Though I'm a perpetual work in progress, I have been a scholar of lowering the walls, practicing empathy, moving past emotional scars, and loving with my whole heart.

And Joseph has become my biggest teacher. He has taught me to appreciate the smaller things in life: the majesty of the sun setting on the hills; the magic in a bird's song; delicious aromas of the earth as it awakens in the mornings. Nothing is to be taken for granted, especially the sweet, sing-song chant of a child's conversation.

One Saturday, Joseph walked into the living room and watched as I danced to "Uptown Funk." Wordlessly, he stepped in front of me and began stomping in time to the music—an accomplishment for someone on the Autism spectrum. Tears clouded my vision. I was grateful when the song ended because I have all the grace of an ostrich on ice and I wasn't prepared to spend Saturday morning in the emergency room.

Joseph chewed his finger as he studied me. "*La vita é bella*, Mama?" he questioned, reading the front of my shirt.

"Yes Joseph, *La vita é bella*. It means 'Life is beautiful.'"

And it is, even when it's a roller coaster ride of emotions.