

Honorable Mention, Non-Fiction

Uncomplicated Bliss Belongs

by Jana Palcer

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When people talk about their favorite things in life, they often provide cliché answers such as: sunsets, chocolate, and belly laughs; or toes in the sand, rainstorms, and the smell of fresh cut grass. These are examples of the simple being glorified, and the mundane found meaningful. In short, uncomplicated bliss. Life boiled down to the basics where joy is fully felt. Why is “uncomplicated bliss” deemed so beautiful a thing when found in the repertoire of our day to day goings-on, but not when found in the precious spirit of my little girl with almond eyes and a button nose?

If you were to ask her, my Lexi, what her favorite things were...and an answer could magically form on her lips...she would bring forth a very similar offering of pure and simplistic joy: feet in the pool, pizza, and playing outside; or french fries, friends, and having fun. Happiness clearly does not take I.Q. into account, as the world’s favored things bear a striking resemblance to those of my daughter’s. Chocolate or french fries, it’s all the same. Toes in the sand or feet in the pool, what’s the difference as long as your shoes are off? Happiness meets you where you are at, as does purpose and meaning and calling in life. So why is it that when things like happiness and purpose are looked at in a person with Down syndrome...or cerebral palsy or autism for that matter...they somehow get viewed as lower, less than, or lacking? Why do misguided minds wrongly dissect these things which are born of the soul, and determine that they don’t mean as much due to the unique and different way they may manifest themselves?

Why, for example, do the minds of those who work with Lexi in her public school system, view her purpose in such a lesser light that they are remiss to give it wings? Why do they seem to care more what her peers will do with their one and only life, than what she will do with hers? Don’t the details of all dreams need to be doted upon, even those of the disabled? Don’t the plans for all futures call for ample focus and fine tuning? Isn’t it imperative for every child that we do now what will lead to positive and productive outcomes later?

I wish I didn't have to ask these questions, and I wish I didn't know what the true and ugly answers to them were. But I do, and I am disturbed. Deeply. Why is the notion so heavily embraced that children's purposes, dreams, and futures have differing levels of value, thereby invoking differing levels of investment depending on what those purposes, dreams, and futures might entail? I won't seek to ascribe motives here, but I will be sure to make clear that this setting apart and this leaving behind hurts. It demeans. It belittles life, and devastates what could be far brighter tomorrows.

And by the way, everyone's tomorrows matter. Everyone's. Whether or not you have speech from your lips, you have a calling in your heart. Whether or not you have sight from your eyes, you have a vision in your soul. Whether or not you ever sit behind a desk and make a million, you can stand as the person God created you to be and make a difference.

And that's what those with disabilities are poised and ready to do if only given the chance. They are innately difference-makers when they are afforded the opportunity to be so. Why? Because they naturally possess so much of what the world needs in order to be a better place. They can demonstrate love like is often not seen, humbleness that is many times missing, wisdom that holds great value, inner strength that overshadows might, tenacity that overcomes obstacles, innocence that is refreshing, joy that is overflowing, faith that is persevering, and light that leads the way.

But how much of this "light" shines when it is hidden in a room segregated from the rest? How much love and wisdom can be shared when it is not made welcome in the mainstream? Separate is not equal. Our nation decided that a long time ago. But regardless, life for many with disabilities continues to unfold at an unfair distance, as they sit sidelined by a society that provides them ramps, but little relief from rejection...or laws, due to lack of funding, that cannot be leaned upon.

How are inclusive practices to be ushered in, when the practices common to exclusion were never ushered out? It is still prevalent to cite what a differently-abled person cannot do instead of citing what it is that they can. It is still acceptable for the measuring stick to be used to show how far away someone is from their destination, instead of to pinpoint how far they have come. The strongest focus continues to be upon the "normality" that remains elusive, instead of the commonality that is so overwhelmingly pervasive. Under this mode of operations, what is currently present and observed is paramount, while what lurks in the realm of possibility is left untapped, all but ignored. In this deficits-based formula for determining success, the spotlight

refuses to stray from what is absent onto what has been achieved, and in doing so, slams shut the doors to untold opportunities and accomplishments that should be flung wide open. In the end, hope for inclusion is all but reduced to empty “access” at some arbitrary level, while the ultimate gift of “belonging” is relentlessly denied.

And make no mistake that it is belonging that is what counts. In belonging, dreams and purposes can be shared and lived out. In belonging, appreciation can be grown, and understanding can be cultivated. When there is a genuine coming together instead of a concerted effort to keep apart, it is advancement and enlightenment that are naturally to follow. Beyond wheelchairs, or braces, or beautiful almond eyes, there is indisputable equality in what lies in the heart, but that cannot be seen and known when paths are purposely prevented from intertwining. That can't be realized and embraced when division is the goal, at the crushing sacrifice of unity. Inclusion and belonging are not meant to come and go on a rotating basis. They do not exist in increments, or become born upon whims. They do not occur by being penciled in at limited times throughout the day, or take root when forced to conform to the convenience of someone else's busy schedule.

Feelings of inclusion and belonging are distinctive, powerful, and felt in our bones. They cannot be faked, substituted, or futilely manipulated. They take residence in our being and inform our souls of who we are and what our worth is in the world around us. When a contradictory message is sent that says one is good enough to be a part of this, but not of that; one is capable of being here now, but not later; one's presence is acceptable at some point, but not at another, there is conflict in the heart and the mind that is not easily overcome. There is a detrimental branding of deficiency on the psyche that undermines all that comes forth from it. So while there is already one level of disability in play, another one is callously added. Physical or mental challenges that pre-existed are now met with emotional ones that never needed to be. Ones that could have been avoided, that should have been prevented, and that demanded sparing from those souls that deserve them least.

So “uncomplicated bliss”. Treasured in life, but not always welcomed in my little girl. Valued as that which can bring true joy, but often deemed devoid of worth when spawned in my daughter's heart. Despite what society may say, Lexi and her uncomplicated bliss *DO* belong, and in fact, *DO* matter. Along with her purpose that holds meaning, her tomorrows that have the ability to be bright, and her almond eyes that reflect the very love, goodness, and hope for which this world is crying out.

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to put my thoughts into words. It will be hard to explain how much it was needed, but suffice it to say that this contest's timing was perfect. As I create this entry for you, I await news from someone else. News from a Texas Hearing Officer as to whether or not my precious child is worthy of being included in class with her "typical" fifth grade peers. Four years of battle now all come down to one decision that will dictate the path my little girl will walk in this world. The same day of your deadline is the deadline for what the law is going to do with her life, so win or lose, I have at least had this writing process to send my feelings out into the universe, and to use as a constructive avenue for the articulation of my pain, hurt, and bewilderment. This act of creatively summarizing the devastating reality of my child's current circumstances has been therapeutic, empowering, and deeply meaningful. But of course my hope goes far beyond winning this contest, to hoping that I win the war that has been fought via Lexi for those with disabilities everywhere...the war that seeks powerfully and mightily to gain equality, value, and belonging for ALL.