

No one was making predictions about this child's capabilities. Twenty-seven years later, his mother still gets caught off guard.

Big Words

BY KRISTIN OHLSON

THE OTHER DAY, my son and I were driving down the street from the store where he works, engaged in the sort of amiable bickering that is the verbal twine of our relationship. Whether I'm always late to pick him up—or whether he is more often the guilty party. Whether he had called either of his grandmothers lately—or whether it was any of my business to remind him to do so. Whether I had flicked on my turn signal long before I needed to, thus irritating him with its unnecessary chirp—or whether he had any business telling me how to manage my turn signal when he doesn't even drive. The final topic—our perennial spat—had to do with whether or not he really needed to buy yet another wrestling DVD and, especially, whether he needed to be standing outside the electronics store before it opened on the day the DVD was released. As we nattered at each other about this one, he offered a grand observation that momentarily knocked the zest for argument out of me.

“Mom,” he declared, “wrestling is a metaphor for life.”

I know this doesn't sound extraordinary. People are always coming up with such metaphors, and wrestling is probably no weirder a comparison to life than many others. But this was my son saying this, my son who is so different from other sons, my son who is so distinctively odd that my daughter and I have a name for others we meet who are like him: “They play on Matt's team,” we say. This is my son about whom a doctor—when sorely pressed twenty-seven years ago by two anguished parents of a year-old boy who spent all his waking moments flapping his hands and staring at light bulbs—regretfully said that he would likely be severely retarded when he grew up. Oh, and that he would continue to have autistic-like behavior.

Yes, this was my son using not only a new word but a new kind of word. Metaphor—a word about words, a word from the land of rhetorical abstraction, a word that suggests that the user can detect subtle, even hidden, connections between unlike things. It's a sophisticated, thoughtful word that a lot of people with triple-digit IQs don't know how to handle or wouldn't care to. I don't know what Matt's IQ is these days—it seems to be the kind of thing that just doesn't matter anymore—but I know that somewhere in his brain, a handful of neurons have formed a new constellation and its light shines in this new word.

This pattern of Matt's outstripping my expectations has been going on as long as he's been around. I'm sure it's a pattern that goes on in everyone's lives. We can't seem to help sizing each other up; maybe we have some evolutionary need to assume predictability. But parents of children with handicaps crash into an apparent brick wall of limitations early on. When Matt was moving from grade to grade in school—or not moving—I would compare him to all those other kids who were doing the age-appropriate things that a chart said they were supposed to be doing. He wasn't doing most of those things. Sometimes I could hardly bear to watch him among his peers.

But now he's an adult in the real world outside school. He floats in a pool of people of all ages, with all kinds of quirks and startling abilities. He doesn't stand out quite so much. And now there are surprising answers to some of the questions his father and I asked the psychologists and neurologists all those years ago, as we tried to imagine what his life would be like—and whether it would be anything like ours.

Would he ever drive a car? No.

Would he take a girl to prom? No, but he went and danced up a storm anyway.

Would he be able to live on his own? A most resounding yes! He not only has his own apartment, but it's stocked with a DVD player, an enormous number of video games, a computer, a queen-sized bed, and a green chenille couch with matching pillows, all purchased by himself with money earned at his job. He works full time at a grocery store, has benefits, and even won the Most Valued Employee award one year. His father and I don't have to contribute a dime to his lifestyle, although we some-



times do. And his landlady called once to tell me that on the first day of the month, Matt's check is the first tucked under her doormat, always and without fail.

Will he have friends? He does now, although I have to say that his elementary school years were heart-breakingly bleak. Now, he and a few buddies go out bowling every now and then, or to a movie, or to a sports bar (gasp!). Only one of them can drive and the others haven't learned to get around as well as Matt does on the buses and the rapid transit, so he doesn't hang out with them as often as other young men probably hang with their buddies. But he has many

other friends, too. The people in the fancy new condo development that he walks past every morning on his way to work. The people who run the gift shops under his apartment building. The girls who work at the restaurants near his store, as well as the woman who owns the bookstore across the street. When he and I go out to dinner near his store, people stream past the table to shake his hand. He and I are usually in the middle of an argument, so he only nods to them, sometimes so imperiously that I have to kick him under the table and tell him to be a little more gracious with his celebrity.

All these people are FOMs



(Friends of Matt), as his father and sister and I call them, and they seem to gather in number. It's hard to explain how magical this is. Not that he doesn't have his charm and his winning ways, but he can also be a major pain in the ass—he has, as one social worker told me, a “big personality.” Plus, I'm always afraid he'll get in trouble with people through errors in judgment because he doesn't quite get things in the way that other people get them. Example: When he was about nine years old, he came home from school, got balky when I told him to do his homework, then told me I was a Ho and a Foo. He didn't realize these words were street talk for Whore and Fool—he had picked them up from a classmate, who probably knew better than to address his mother that way. It took about a year for me to purge those words from his

vocabulary. Still, an amazing number of people declined to take offense when he said them.

Even now that he's an adult, people cut him all kinds of slack. Once, I was in his store, hunkered down near the giant bags of dog food, observing him; I often do this because I just can't get used to the idea that he's grown up and has a real job. He was twenty feet away from me, stacking cans, when two elderly women approached him to ask a question. Instead of responding politely—he's usually downright courtly to his customers—his mouth dropped open, he scowled, and he was clearly so incredulous that he couldn't manage words, even though his lips twitched in agitation. “Why is he acting like that?” I fumed and started to send smoke signals from my spot near the Purina. Instead of seeming miffed,

the two elderly women turned to each other, tittered, then addressed Matt again. His scowl deepened and his mouth remained open but no sound came out, and the women tittered again. And then it happened yet again! Finally, a manager came over and talked to the women as Matt stood there shaking his head. He finally saw me and strode over.

“Why were you so rude to those women?” I demanded.

He was still wearing the same aggrieved scowl, his lips still fluted with indignation. “Mom,” he said. “Why on earth would two old ladies be asking for snuff?”

But there it was again—the kindness of strangers. Neither the two elderly women nor my son's coworkers got huffy. The two women seemed amused and the coworker seemed pleasantly resigned—and perhaps this is even more remarkable, since I wouldn't blame him if he wearied of my son's occasional gaffes and his ongoing need for accommodation. Instead, he and most of the other people at the store seem to enjoy Matt, encourage him, and watch out for him. A few years ago, there were a couple of young women working at the store who were deliberately not kind—they had devised an evil entertainment that involved heavy flirting with Matt and the other “special” employees at the store, then complaining about sexual harassment if any of the guys responded inappropriately. One of the cashiers whispered about this to me as I was paying for my bag of groceries one day, and I panicked. I thought immediately of looking for the girls and banging their heads into the side of the parking lot dumpster. But I didn't need to do anything: the cashier and some of the other employees closed ranks around my son and told the

girls to take their meanness elsewhere.

Of course, this brings up the delicate, impossible subject of sex. His father and I had also asked the doctors all those years ago, Will he have a girlfriend? Will he get married? These are the questions that now aggrieve Matt; he wants a beloved and he wants to have children. Several years ago, he was involved with a sexually aggressive and emotionally disturbed girl from His Team, and his father and I fretted over the dreadful possibility of conception. The relationship ended, the girl went on to get pregnant with someone else, and we sighed for that baby's future and resolved to speak to Matt about his. We suggested a vasectomy to prepare for the day that he would have a nice girlfriend, one with whom he might have an ongoing relationship and maybe even marriage, but he was horrified. There were some unpleasant, tearful moments between Matt and his father, who minced no words about what he felt was the urgency of this decision. I had a harder time talking about this—it was Matt's dream, after all—but one day I haltingly brought up the subject again. He told me that he loved babies. I told him that he could always love them as an uncle or second cousin or friend. He told me that he could take good care of a baby. I asked him what he would do if his baby woke up in the middle of the night with a high fever. Would he know how to contact a doctor? Would he even know how to take the baby's temperature?

"My wife could do that," he answered.

"Sweetheart," I said. "Why do you think your wife would be able to do those things any better than you can?"

Then he became agitated and had

to walk it off by stomping to the kitchen and back. When he returned, he gave me a piteous look. "How do you know I'll marry someone like me?" he said. "What if I marry a beautiful woman? What if I marry someone like you?"

You have to understand that this is the only time in his life that he's ever suggested that I'm beautiful. Mostly, he refers to me as "my old lady" or "my *old* old lady." Years ago, he drew a picture of me and titled it "Pimple Blimp." I believe he's adopted this kind of insouciant manner, this apparent emotional toughness, because he's smart enough to see how much he's missing in the world—his learning differences aren't so vast that he misses the size of the gap between himself and others. And of course, not all strangers are kind. I'm not even always kind. So for Matt to drop his attitudinal armor, for him to speak his longing for a beautiful woman like his mother—well, it breaks my heart nearly as much as the doctor's gloomy pronouncements did twenty-seven years ago.

I guess the difference between now and then is the twenty-seven years. I've had a lot of time to watch my son grow and change, to see him become the man he is today: funny, interesting, responsible, self-sufficient, and giving (it was his idea that the two of us volunteer at a hunger center once a month). I've had all that time to see how he can startle me with new insights and capabilities, to realize that every time I decide he can go as far as X, he goes X plus. He can't do everything his father and I had imagined back in the days when he was still inside me, a writhing lump of humanity waiting to wail his way into the world. Still, he is now what I never would have imagined

back in the days when he'd jerk away from me to stare at the light bulbs.

I've been trying to think of a metaphor myself—one that captures the idea that all of us are mysterious and sometimes wonderful packages, like my son. And I'm reminded of the Surprise Balls that my parents used to bring me when they came home from a trip. I'd break the seal and unwind what seemed like miles of brightly colored crepe paper ribbons, chasing the Surprise Ball across the living room floor as if I were a kitten. Every once in a while a loop of crepe paper would reveal a charm, which dropped away from the ball and went into my pocket. There was always that breathless anticipation as the ball got smaller: Were there any surprises left? My son's use of the word "metaphor" was like one of those gleaming charms. It reminded me, yet again, that I should never stop looking for them.

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Even after all these years, my son is still a marvel to me. He's like all the rest of us, but then again, he isn't. The differences allow me—prod me—to look at the world through a slightly varied lens, with slightly varied preconceptions. I love to write about him because he's one of the most interesting people I know, but I always ask first. He grudgingly tolerates it, only because I agreed a few years ago to split any proceeds with him. I guess this is one of those rare occasions when it's okay for a journalist to pay a source. I'm just glad he didn't think of applying a steep per-word rate to these pieces, which he would if he knew about such things. He is ferociously good at managing his money, even though he has to use his fingers to add double-digit numbers. Isn't that amazing?